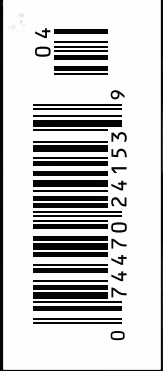


# COILHOUSE


A LOVE LETTER TO ALTERNATIVE CULTURE

issue **04**

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# COILHOUSE

A LOVE LETTER TO ALTERNATIVE CULTURE

issue 04



# COILHOUSE

A LOVE LETTER TO ALTERNATIVE CULTURE

## FOUNDING EDITORS

Nadya Lev | Zoetica Ebb | Meredith Yayanos  
nadyalev.com | biorequiem.com | theremina.net

## CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Courtney Riot  
courtneyriot.com

## GRAPHIC DESIGNERS

Molly Hawthorne  
digtalcase.net

Nubby Twiglet  
nubbytwiglet.com

## COPY CHIEF

Joanne Starer  
barbiehead@aol.com

## WRITERS

Ales Kot  
aleskotsays@gmail.com

Angeliska Polacheck  
angeliska.com

Jessica Joslin  
jessicajoslin.com

Joshua Ellis  
zenarchery.com

Mark Powell  
dearme.co.uk

Tanya Virodova  
stayfortea.com

## ILLUSTRATORS

Christine Rucker  
christineryeah.com

Dame Darcy  
damedarcy.com

Kurt Komoda  
agonyagogo.com

## PHOTOGRAPHERS

Allan Amato  
venuswept.org

Chad Michael Ward  
digitalapocalypse.com

Todd Brooks  
pendu.org

Ports Bishop  
younggodrecords.com

AC Berkheiser  
northseadivision.com

Kacper Rogala  
flickr.com/photos/krogala

## ARCHIVISTS

Joseph Holsten  
josephholsten.com

Jack & Beverly Wilgus  
brightbytes.com

National Media Museum  
nationalmediamuseum.org.uk

## CIRCULATION DIRECTOR

Gretta Sherwood  
thegroundedvagabond.etsy.com

## CONTACT

coilhouse@gmail.com  
coilhouse.net

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## ILLUSTRATION OPPOSITE PAGE

Kurt Komoda

## ON THE COVER

Kristamas Klousch

issue04

This issue of Coilhouse is haunted.

Or maybe it's possessed. Or it could be we've got a grimoire on our hands.

All we know is, at some point during our editorial process—which normally involves very little cauldron-stirring or eye of newt, despite whatever "coven" rumors you may have heard—#04 took on a life of its own. It has since become a small, seething portal of the uncanny. It's all a bit magic-with-a-k. We may giggle and wink ("O RLIEH! LA, RLIEH!"), but that doesn't change the fact that these pages are spellbound. You will read of channeling and serving, of shades and shamans, and phantoms both fabricated and inexplicable. You will meet reluctant oracles, occultists, and ghosts from the past.

Most—if not all—of the innovators included in these pages are mystics of sorts. Each one has forged a unique path to enchantment. Sculptor Kris Kuksi [page 44] crafts sepulchral shrines to the eternal. The sagacious, ever-weird filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky [page 52] consults tarot cards. Witchy songstress Larkin Grimm [page 76] runs Thelomic music festivals. Perfumer Christopher Brosius [page 88] is an alchemist with scent. Once upon a time, writer Grant Morrison [page 66] crafted hypersigils in his comics and conferred with voodoo scorpion gods. Our cover girl, Kristamas Klousch [page 58] creates eerily gorgeous self-portraits that seem to have been dipped directly into the ether.

Meanwhile Joshua Ellis' essay on the living-dead counterculture [page 26], Mark Powell's review of the Edinburgh "Science of Ghosts" lecture series [page 36], and Mer's own compulsive documentation of the long-gone children of pioneer America [page 12] are all deeply nostalgic and rooted in a past that will never return. At most, their specters can whisper furtively to us from the other side of the veil. If you listen closely, you'll hear them.

Happy hauntings,

*Nadya Zoetica Mer*  
December 2007





COH

LOVE LETTER TO



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“Going out into the Black Forest and being initiated into the Mysteries by a bunch of demented, hairy cenobites is one form of liminal experience; doing acid and listening to pounding, digital, screeching noise with a pack of creepy pale weirdos is another, but the core experience is nearly the same.”

**Joshua Ellis, page 26**

ILLUSTRATION Zoetica Ebb





# The Tarnished Beauties of BLACKWELL, Oklahoma

CRISSCROSSING AMERICA'S INTERSTATES on shoestring music tours, my bandmates and I drive past scores of battered roadside billboards. They advertise ramshackle sculpture gardens, art brut outposts, World's Biggest Fill-in-the-Blanks, rustic museums, and obscure historic landmarks. Such attractions are usually located in quiet little towns only a short distance from the highway. More often than not, we make a point to stop, stretch our legs, and explore. These spontaneous jaunts expose us to beauty and knowledge we would never have discovered otherwise.

Last year, trekking across the Bible Belt with the nomadic avant-folk outfit Faun Fables, I encountered the Top of Oklahoma Museum, housed in the somewhat dilapidated (but still glorious) Electric Park Pavilion on Main Street in Blackwell, OK (population 7,700). A grand, white structure with a large central dome, this so-called Palace on the Prairie was built in 1912 to celebrate the advent of electricity in Blackwell. Its design takes after styles exhibited at the famed White City of the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. Its lights, which originally numbered over five hundred, could once be seen for miles across the windswept grasslands.

When I visited, the pavilion was in need of some serious TLC.\* Multiple leaks in the dome had endangered the museum's contents. Plastic tarps enshrouded several exhibits. Many items bore marks of water damage. One of the kindly septuagenarian docents working there that day followed us from room to room, clucking over the holes in the roof, the rusty stains. These senior preservationists take a lot of pride in their charge, with good reason. The ToOM is a sprawling treasure trove of turn-of-the-century ephemera, railroad memorabilia, articles of Cherokee life, hand-carved walking sticks and pipes, dioramas, dollhouses, baby buggies, hobbyist's taxidermy, antique musical and medical instruments, Victrolas, zinc smelting documentation, delicate handmade lace, linen and clothing, exceedingly creepy Edwardian dolls, sewing machines, china, vintage propaganda, picture books, elaborate quilting, and countless other keepsakes left behind by the city's first brave citizens.

Judging by these artifacts, the earliest non-native settlers of Oklahoma were hardy, determined folk who struggled to eke out a life on America's frontier. How they maintained such an unshakable air of dignity and refinement is beyond me, but Blackwell is a true, sparkling diamond in

the rough. For me, nothing symbolized the spirit of its founders better than a certain portrait of a young woman, unceremoniously presented on a torn, watermarked bit of pasteboard in the museum's School Room.

Her name was Lola Squires, and she was a student enrolled in Blackwell High, graduating class of 1916. That's all I know. Her gaze knocked me back several feet. Once I finally stop staring at her, I realized that there were countless other flint-eyed and bow-bedecked young beauties on the walls nearby. I must have spent well over an hour in that one small room, moving from portrait to portrait, documenting as much as I could, just stunned.

It bears mentioning that I'm one of those weirdos you'll often see at flea markets or estate sales, rummaging through some grimy crate of long-forgotten family photos. I have this near-pathological urge to rescue lost and discarded images of people long since grown up, grown old, deceased. Despite knowing nothing about them beyond what I see in their pictures, I claim them as kin of my own. I adopt their ghosts. I'm not sure why I feel so strongly about collecting unloved, unremembered images. (Any armchair psychologists out there with insight into this compulsion are welcome to share their theories!)

At some point, the aforementioned docent poked her head into the room. "You're still in here? What for?" I excitedly pointed out various faces that I'd fallen in love with: the stern, unnamed schoolmarm who looked like she relished administering corporal punishment; the doughy maiden whose enormous bows turned her head into a crinkling wrapped toffee; Potter, a smirking phys-ed coach in a smart black coat ...

My enthusiasm seemed to rub off on her a bit. "You know, I don't think I ever really looked at any of these before." She put on her reading glasses to examine the images more carefully, pondering whether some of the faces might be potential ancestors of people she'd grown up with in Blackwell.

Together, we mused and hypothesized. What were these teenagers thinking about when their photos were taken almost a century ago? Who was sweet on whom? Which ones were popular? Who had been lonely? Eventually, she started taking framed portraits down from the wall, wiping the dust from the glass so that I could take clearer pictures of them.

The docent reminisced about the large, sturdy brick Blackwell schoolhouse I kept seeing in photographs, which she'd attended back in the late forties. "This was the room where they held biology, and here on the second floor was English, and down in the basement was history."

"I never cared much for history when I was young, but you know, I think more about those things now ..."

She was still in that room when I left it, watching over the children behind the dusty glass.

\*SINCE MY VISIT BACK IN JUNE OF 2008, SUBSTANTIAL REPAIRS HAVE BEEN MADE TO THE MUSEUM'S ROOF, RESTORING THE BUILDING TO ITS FORMER GLORY. THE ELECTRIC PARK PAVILION IS LOCATED AT 303 SOUTH MAIN IN BLACKWELL, OK. THE ToOM IS OPEN MONDAY-SATURDAY, 10:00 AM TO 5:00 PM AND SUNDAY FROM 1:00 PM TO 5:00 PM. ADMISSION IS FREE, BUT COILHOUSE RECOMMENDS THAT YOU DONATE GENEROUSLY.



ARTICLE  
Meredith Yaxanos

PHOTOS  
Archival images documented by  
Joseph A Holsten AND  
Meredith Yaxanos

Cease to resist, giving my good bye





DAVE  
SHEARER



Lola  
Squ



"Her name was Lola Squires, and she  
was a student enrolled in Blackwell High  
graduating class of 1916. That's all I know."





Despite knowing nothing about them beyond what I see in their pictures, I claim them as kin of my own. I adopt their ghosts.





# BERND PREIML'S

photographs describe a world filled with magic and mystery, often coupled with a disconcerting sense that sinister forces may be lurking. Growing up in the mountainous countryside outside of Vienna, he seems to have internalized some of the quiet inscrutability of the snow-shrouded mountains and trees. As a boy, he was struck by the rich colors and lush pageantry of Catholicism, set against the wildness of nature. He recalls festive processions in traditional costumes and folk tales about ancient creatures and wild people who inhabited the forests.

Many of his subjects are hauntingly lovely, yet there is a sense of intensity, whether manic or melancholy, hovering around the eyes and below the skin. This is not the type of beauty that sits prettily on the surface of a face, obscuring what lies beneath. His characters engage the viewer with a disturbing, sometimes mesmerizing force. Although Preiml's work often appears in the context of fashion magazine editorials, he uses the viewer's presumptions to create confusion. He embraces the idea of creating something entirely unexpected, something poignant, strange, or delightful, hiding amidst the frivolity. He understands that beauty isn't interesting unless it is somehow soiled, unless it is complex.

His recent forays into video are an elegant extension of his photographic work. In his video for Bourne, *The Painting*, he tells a tale suffused with such love and longing that it feels like the equivalent of a Victorian Memento Mori, woven from intricately braided locks of hair. This sense of melancholy romanticism serves as a perfect foil for the lingering threat of violence that often seems to accompany his images. Through all of his deliciously rich visual narratives, he explores memories and desires, as if seen through the poetic fragmentation of a dream.

# EXQUISITE APPARITIONS

INTERVIEW BY  
JESSICA  
JOSLIN

In your series *Austro Mech*, there is a wonderful juxtaposition between abstract images (lines that appear to be drawn in charcoal) and images of women with otherworldly eyes, partially bald heads, and human but mechanistic bodies. The lines found in the drawings also appear to correspond to scars on some of the bodies. What was the concept behind these amazing images?

In general, I like images of people who are inactive. Often, I am asked why I like to show dead people so much, but to me, my subjects are not dead—they are just not active. There is, for me, always some sort of dialogue inside the shell, which is visible on the outside. Often I combine images of lifeless people or faces with other images, which may serve as projections of what is going on inside. In this series, I created the lines you refer to, which are actually pieces of wood “pressed” together, giving the impression of line art or drawing. They are like compressed thoughts, or a kind of language. For the spectator, it's like a code that is not meant to be deciphered; that's the beauty of it. In addition to this concept, I fell into the idea of a future populated by humanoid droids that serve the community. I thought of the cruelty that humans would inflict upon these lifelike creatures. What would people do to artificial life forms, especially when they looked like people? I think there would be a great amount of physical as well as sexual abuse. The images of these droids reflect what these discharged creatures went through.

**Do you see a difference between the intent of the work that you have made independently, for gallery exhibitions, and the work that was commissioned specifically by magazines?**

There is no difference at all. I always have a similar approach to my work, regardless of the medium. What I like best about magazines is the fact that there are pages to flip through. The format is quite linear, so it's possible for me to bring a sequential order to the series of pictures. When you flip through a magazine, it's a bit like reading a story. That's what I often wish to achieve. I very rarely produce single pictures. I usually work in series of ten to fifteen images per series, and it's difficult to take out just one or two images.

“WHAT STAYS  
BEHIND ARE THE  
GHOSTS of the  
PAST”

**When we first met, the conversation seemed to lean more towards politics than artwork. Is there a political subtext to your work that may not be readily apparent?**

I think that every art form is in some (often vague) way political. To me, *political* does not necessarily imply a commentary about something that has happened in politics or something that you are not okay with in the world. It's more about an attitude that you have towards the world and yourself. For me, politics has a lot to do with moral values, what is wrong



Die Hobagoas

and what is right. Even to abnegate any kind of political statement is political. It's the same thing with religion. I have found that atheists or agnostics are sometimes more religious than churchgoing Catholics, because they have truly reflected on their beliefs and come up with their own alternative to organized religion.

I'm generally not too interested in daily politics or in political theories, as I believe that politics are just a sort of theater. It's economics that governs everything. Political parties and structures are a bit like the Catholic Church, which has little to do with truly believing in something. With all its figures and paintings, it's ultimately just something that makes it easier for people to understand some abstract idea of God. It makes it easier for people to find their place in this world. Political systems do the same thing; they give people the illusion that they are looked after.





“THEY ARE LIKE  
COMPRESSED  
THOUGHTS.  
OR A KIND OF  
LANGUAGE.”

THEY ARE LIKE  
COMPRESSED  
THOUGHTS  
OR A KIND OF  
LANGUAGE







I believe that everyone should be able to create his own version of the world and not think in premade structures. Artists do that, and therefore what they do is something truly political.

Are there any particular films and/or directors that you feel have influenced your aesthetic?

There are many, although I am not sure if they influenced my aesthetic. There may be traces of the type of imagery used in gothic movies in my work. I really love Italian horror and exploitation films from the sixties, seventies, and eighties. The most influential director for me is Mario Bava, a cinematographer turned director. His style is very gothic and stylish. Dario Argento is also a favorite, as I like movies with fetishistic and stylized violence. Also, David Lynch, David Cronenberg, Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam, and Wes Anderson are amongst my favorites. I actually like all types of movies, as long as they have a surreal or a fairytale-ish tone; but somehow, most of those seem to be horror movies. I also enjoy musicals with Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, and Ginger Rogers. They make me happy, as do Russian fairy tale movies. Some of my favorite Russian films in this genre are *Father Frost* and *Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors*, both by Aleksandr Rou, as well as *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, by Aleksandr Ptushko, and *Finest, the Brave Falcon*, by Gennadi Vasilyev. I also admire the directors Georgi Kropachyov and Konstantin Yershov. Some wonderful Eastern European directors, working in a similar vein, are Jan Svankmajer, Karel Zeman, Wladyslaw Starewicz, and Juraj Herz. I enjoy the film *The Cremator* in particular.

If I had to name my favorite movie, it would have to be *The Wizard of Oz* because that's the film that I've seen the most often. I especially love the Wicked Witch of the West, my favorite character ever! One thing that I love more than movies are old VHS covers and movie posters. I love the idea of showing just a few bits and pieces of a movie, because you quickly start to make your own version of the film in your head.

The series *Die Hobagoas* features an intriguingly leonine character. Is there a particular story attached to these images and that character? Is there any correlation between this character and the threatening, masked figure in *Svetopluk*?

I think that both of them are interpretations of the classic boogeyman, a creature that serves to frighten children. Die Hobagoas is a character that is used in rural parts of Austria to scare the kids. Parents would say, "Come home before it gets dark or the Hobagoas will fetch you!" I like these characters because they seem so simple and one-dimensional; their only purpose is to frighten people. It's as if they are some sort of evil police. It's very tempting to give these sorts of figures a face, although, personally, I always hate to see the monster in movies. I prefer it when these figures, the monsters, stay off the screen. I suppose that's why I'm not fully satisfied with the images of the Hobagoas. I like the Svetopluk better, because he is far more mysterious. He leaves room for interpretation.

I suppose I am predisposed toward images with circus iconography, but I am fascinated by the *Zingling* series of images. In particular, there is an unusual wooden structure, which seems to represent the circus tent. How did you go about creating this particular, and very individualistic, reimagining of a circus? Could you tell us about some of the characters and their circumstances?

The wooden tent was built on the computer with the help of my friend, Martin Perktold. He is very good with 3-D (I am unfortunately not). The idea was to create something like a hybrid between a house and a circus tent. A wooden tent is not movable; that inherently makes this tent very strange. A circus troupe might normally play in each town for one or two weeks and then leave for another city. This tent does not move. It's very old, and many things have happened there. The glory days are over, and what stays behind are the ghosts of the past. I don't want to go into details about the characters. I feel that it's up to the viewer to create his version of the story. I think that I will have to work on this topic again some day, as I also love the circus very much and I am not quite satisfied with these images. In general, I am not very happy with many of the pictures that I've made, but I suppose that's what keeps me on track and that's why I have to go on ...

“IT’S LIKE A  
CODE THAT IS NOT  
MEANT TO BE  
DECRYPTED  
; THAT’S THE BEAUTY OF IT.”



# CHILDREN BY THE MILLIONS WAIT FOR ALEX CHILTON

A FRACTURED MEMOIR OF THE COUNTERCULTURE



ARTICLE BY  
JOSHUA ELLIS

COILHOUSE

I HAVE THIS MEMORY, and I'm not sure if it's even real—or if it's real, if it's cobbled together from a half-dozen memories, fragments of things that happened over the course of a year or two that began the summer before I started high school, in 1991.

In this memory, I'm sitting in the basement of a girl named Sara, who pronounced her name "Saah-rah" and had purple hair and smoked clove cigarettes. I didn't know Sara very well, but she was part of a small collective of freaks and weirdos that I had congregated to when I moved that summer from my ancestral home of north Texas to the small mountain town of Hamilton, Montana.

I'm sitting in Sara's basement with my friends: Jeremy, the pretty guy who wears big black woolen overcoats and Jamaican tam o' shanters in bright yellow and red and green, and seems to have unlimited access to the panties of every single girl in the Bitterroot Valley; Wade, who perpetually sports Birkenstock loafers that look like inflated bladders and drives a white Volkswagen Beetle covered in Grateful Dead stickers; Nate, who is one of the best guitarists I've ever met and is a huge aficionado of what will later come to be known as "extreme" sports, like bouncing down jagged rock faces on a beat-up skateboard deck; Sarah and her sister, Jenny, who are both fond of dropping random giggly non sequiturs into the conversation when stoned.

They're all here, or some of them, or none of them. We're sitting in the dark, talking bohemian bullshit, maybe smoking pot. It's the kind of night that gets put on endless repeat when you're young and strange and condemned to spend your adolescence in some far-flung desolate shithole like Hamilton, Montana, where you can't lose yourself in the noise or happily become part of it, the way you can in New York or Seattle or Los Angeles or Chicago.

I'm not as cool as they are. I don't know about cool shit. I'm just this uptight kid from J. R. Ewing Land who talks too much, still wears Bugle Boy button-downs and M. C. Hammer pants, and has only the dimmest idea that there's some entire world out there of cool shit that I know nothing about. I own a Jane's Addiction album and I've vaguely heard of the Sex Pistols.

And in this memory, Sara gets up and puts a cassette tape into her boom box. It's a time traveler from 1984, beaten and scuffed, with the inevitable broken-off cassette door, so you just slap the tape in and hope that the tape head keeps it from falling out, which will cause the relentless motors to chew the tape and unspool it like the entrails of a slaughtered pig. Sara slaps the tape in and hits play.

This song comes out—a slow beat, big and echoing, then a bass playing eighth notes, and then a guitar, dreamy and vibrating. It sounds like what I imagine sunrise on a beach would be like, like what I imagine doing heroin would be like, like what I imagine sex in a dark room with that awesome girl you lie awake and dream of meeting would be like. I haven't experienced any of these things—yet.

And then a voice, a high husky man's voice, gentle over the music.

Cease to resist, given my good-byes  
Drive my car into the o-o-sha-hah-hahn  
You think I'm dead, but I sail away  
On a wave of mutilation, wave of mutilation  
Wave of mutilation  
Way-hey-hey-hey-have  
Way-hey-hey-hey-have

"What is this?" I ask. Sara shrugs.

"It's the Pixies," she says in this memory that may not even be real, or maybe didn't happen this way at all. "The song's called 'Wave of Mutilation.' This is the U.K. Surf Mix. The real version is faster and louder."

"I've never heard of them," I said. "I've never heard this."  
"They're pretty cool," Sara says. "I think they're from, like, Boston."  
I nod. Pretty cool.

In his 1989 book *Lipstick Traces*, music journalist and historian Greil Marcus attempts to draw a direct connection between the British punk movement of the late seventies and the heretical, mystical Christian sects like the *fraticelli* and the Brethren of the Free Spirit that haunted Europe for the thousand years of the Dark Ages. It's a weird postmodern book, and Marcus travels some tortured roads ... but as Johnny Lydon is quoted as saying on the book's back cover, he's not wrong, either.

There are lots of parallels between mysticism and the counterculture. In the Dark Ages, in a pre-mass-media world, being a mystic was countercultural; it was the equivalent of growing your hair long and joining a band in 1965, or sculpting your hair into strange shapes and joining a band in 1976, or growing a goofy beard and joining a dubstep laptop collective in 2009. Going against the Church was punk as fuck in the eleventh century. (In *Lipstick Traces*, Marcus makes an amusing parallel between Lydon, singer of the Sex Pistols, and John of Leyden, the Anabaptist heretic who took over the city of Münster in Germany and turned it into an anti-Church stronghold for a year. Leyden was captured and put to death on January 22, 1536 ... almost 442 years to the day before the Sex Pistols' final gig at Winterland in San Francisco. See? I told you it was a weird book.)

The initiation rituals are pretty similar, too: standing around in a dark room that reeks of incense while people in bizarre clothing play strange music at you. I'm only half-kidding, here; part of the process of becoming either a cultural freak or a mystic is being taken out of one's comfort zone, having one's notions of normality eroded away by deeply liminal experiences. Going out into the Black Forest and being initiated into the Mysteries by a bunch of demented, hairy cenobites is one form of liminal experience; doing acid and listening to pounding,

AND ONCE YOU GAZE INTO THE ABYSS, THE ABYSS GAZES BACK AT YOU, SHAKES ITS HEAD, AND GIVES YOU FASHION TIPS.

digital, screeching noise with a pack of creepy pale weirdos is another, but the core experience is nearly the same. (In fact, if you're a European electronic music fan, you can actually have both experiences simultaneously.)

And once you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes back at you, shakes its head, and gives you fashion tips. Whether it's a hair shirt and self-inflicted whiplashes across the back for the militant fourth-century flagellant or bondage pants, polychrome hair, and household items punctured through the extremities for the twenty-first-century global party kid, the end result is the same: you are explicitly marking yourself as outside the norm as being the Other. There's no going back.

In Marshall McLuhan's world (and this is McLuhan's world; you and I just live in it), the road to enlightenment is less paved with spiritualism and more with pop culture. For the post-war generations transcendence and personal revolution are inextricably tied to mass media like subversive literature, underground films, dirty-ass rock and roll and hip-hop and electronica. For most humans who live in the First World now, there is no Dark Night of the Soul; there's merely that moment when you read that book or see that movie or, as in my case, hear that song, and you're suddenly made aware of all of the possible cultural architectures that you can live in, if you choose.

For me, in high school, the road of excess was rock and roll, combined with the emergent cyberpunk literature of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling and John Shirley. I read Gibson's *Neuromancer* the way an



older generation read Kerouac’s *On the Road*. I didn’t see it as a fun sci-fi novel; I saw it as a blueprint for a world I wanted to live in. In my countercultural utopia, the world was run by punks with leather jackets and permanent data connections wired into their brains, hanging out in Nippophile bars, drinking whiskey and piracetam cocktails, secretly controlling the flow of information in the world via their sticker-laden laptops while listening to utterly synthetic music on their chunky audiophile headphones. My future had a soundtrack by Nine Inch Nails and Massive Attack.

That probably sounds laughable in retrospect, but in the nineties, being a subversive computer freak put you on the raw bleeding edge of culture. I ended up writing for *Mondo 2000*, which, as Neil Gaiman once pointed out to me, was the hippest magazine in the world for about six months, and which served as a sort of neon bible for the cyberpunk set. *Mondo* was a glossy, globally-distributed magazine, but back in those days, before the ubiquity of the Net, it was also hard to get your hands on if you lived outside the central urban cores of the United States ... which made it even more valuable, more like samizdat, subversive literature passed from person to person.

When I was a teenager, I would read every scant issue of *Mondo* I could get my hands on from cover to cover twenty or thirty times. (The fact that *Mondo*’s publishing schedule was about as erratic as Lindsay Lohan on an eight-ball of strawberry-flavored Peruvian flake didn’t help matters, either.) I would load up freeware fractal generation software on my aging 486 PC, set it to color-cycling mode, and listen to Lords of *Acid* tracks I’d managed to dub from other people’s CDs, desperately wishing I was anywhere but the *Hee Haw* purgatory to which I’d been relegated.

I think that a lot of the value of counterculture, in the days before the Net crept into every square inch of the human experience, was the scarcity of it, the mystery. It’s hard to remember that before this decade, it could be downright difficult to find music that wasn’t on major labels or films that weren’t put out by big Hollywood studios or books from small presses. You couldn’t walk into your local Wal-Mart and pick up a Revolting Cocks album, and there was no such thing as Amazon or iTunes; if you were into anything weird and different, your options were severely limited.

Every few months, my friends and I would drive from Hamilton up to Missoula, the nearest college town, to stock up on the shit we couldn’t

# "THERE ARE LOTS OF PARALLELS BETWEEN MYSTICISM AND THE COUNTERCULTURE. GOING AGAINST THE CHURCH WAS PUNK AS FUCK. PUNK AS FUCK IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY."

get in our small town: indie rock albums and copies of *Alternative Press* or *Raygun* or *Mondo 2000*, Cure T-shirts, Violent Femmes posters ... all the trinkets and signifiers of the underground that were so tantalizingly unavailable to us most of the time.

All of this stuff wasn’t just enjoyed for its own sake, of course. It also served as a form of social capital and a way of recognizing like-minded individuals. The ancient Christians painted fish on their chests as a way of recognizing one another; my generation had Joy Division T-shirts. If you walked around with a copy of *Naked Lunch* or an issue of *Sandman*, it marked you as a vector of the cool, a person who could be relied upon to bring new weird shit to the collective table. You were a source not only of companionship and conversation, but fucking awesome mix tapes.

(Media is, of course, how Christianity spread before Constantine made it the official religion of Rome and the councils of Nicaea codified and defined the texts of the Bible. The New Testament was the original viral text, passed hand-to-hand and mouth-to-ear by and within the bored middle class of the triumphal Empire. One can only imagine jaded Roman teenagers gathering together under cover of darkness to talk about the new God and the promise of eternal life, a sort of incredibly straight-faced, sexless, *Footloose*-town-elders early model of teenage wildlife.)

Jeremy and Wade and Sara and Sarah and I were as much a taste tribe as anything else. We bonded mainly because we liked anything weird and outré and offensive, anything that served as an alternative to the bland, dumb shit that most people liked. And we made emotional connections, but they piggybacked on those initial matches in cultural taste.

Almost twenty years on, I’m still that way; I’ll talk to anybody sitting at the coffee shop with a Grant Morrison comic in their hands or a Tom Waits T-shirt. What Nick Hornby said in *High Fidelity* is absolutely true of me: I mostly like people not because of who they are, but because of what they like.

If that sounds shallow, think of it this way: in some sense, your choices in media consumption suggest a lot about who you are and what you believe. Give me twenty minutes with a person’s music collection and I can probably guess a certain amount about their politics, their outlook on life, and whether I could stand to be stuck on a desert island with them.

I have a friend whose litmus test for dating girls is that he plays Tom Waits at them. If they don’t like it or don’t get it, he says, he knows there’s no way they’re compatible. And he’s right, more often than not. Greil Marcus once said that rock and roll is an arena of moral choices, and that’s goddamn right. As much as I have faith in anything, I have faith in that.

Never trust anybody who doesn’t like *Rain Dogs*.

These days, I know who the Pixies are. I know the names of the band members, the bulleted outline of the band’s history, why they broke up (right around the time I was sitting in that basement, in point of fact), and why they got back together. I know about their side projects and solo albums. I have their entire recorded catalog, including B-sides and rarities (such as the aforementioned U.K. Surf Mix of “Wave of Mutilation”), and a couple of live albums, which I keep mainly for archival purposes, as I don’t generally dig live albums.

I know these things partially because I’m an obsessive music geek, but also because, like everybody else in the post-industrial world, I have instant access to nearly limitless information about almost any topic I choose to explore. The Pixies aren’t even one of my favorite bands, though I dig them. But one day a few months ago, I thought, *Hmm, I don’t have enough Pixies on my iPod*, and went and bought a bunch of their stuff on Amazon, and (I admit it) torrented the more obscure stuff. I sat and read their Wikipedia and Allmusic.com entries while the MP3s downloaded, because I’m that kind of person.

If I wanted to, I could probably follow their lead singer, Charles Thompson (aka Black Francis when he’s with the Pixies and Frank Black when he’s not) on Twitter if he’s got an account, and get e-mails in my inbox if they play within a few hundred miles of where I live or release new material or appear on late night TV shows. Thousands of people work for the promise of billions of dollars to create extremely complex network systems that allow me to do this. It’s really kind of miraculous, particularly if you belong to my generation or an earlier one and still remember when none of this was possible.

It’s almost impossible not to know everything about anything you dig now; the temptation to exhaustively research your personal galaxy of interests is irresistible, and so is the temptation to share your obsession with the world, thanks to the magic of cheap hosting and free blog software.

You’d think, as an obsessive geek, that I’d find this wonderful. At the risk of sounding terribly uncool, I mostly find it incredibly tiresome. Maybe I’m just not obsessive enough about the things I’m obsessed over. I mean, I love Tom Waits, but I don’t go out and search Etsy for portraits of Waits made from macramé or colored macaroni; I don’t troll the MP3 blogs for Tom Waits/Lady Gaga mashups; I don’t collect JPGs of old Waits concert posters from the seventies and set them as the wallpaper on all my computers and my iPhone. Maybe it’s because I don’t like the idea of blowing through all of the mystique that surrounds Waits ... or maybe it’s just because I just don’t feel like kicking the shit out of a dead horse.

(This is why I can barely read a lot of popular geek blogs anymore; if I see one more fucking post about obscure Disneyland trivia, the best restaurant to get dim sum between 42nd and 44th Streets in Manhattan, the top seven hottest chicks Michael J. Fox dated during the second season of *Family Ties*, or steampunk *objets d’art* made out of fucking bacon, I’m going to lose my shit and rage like the goddamn *Cloverfield* monster. I swear to God, I will. I mean, for fuck’s sake, don’t people ever just get *tired* of feeding their inner autistic?)

I tend to believe that the Internet has actually killed the concept of a counterculture. Instead, we have what my buddy Warren Ellis calls a *monoculture*. “Go out to your street corner,” he says in his remarkable comic book *Transmetropolitan*. “You’ll probably see McDonald’s, MTV on a screen somewhere, a Gap clothes store. Go out to a street corner in London and you’ll see the same thing. Same in Prague, same in Sao Paolo, Grozny, and Hobart. That’s what a monoculture is. It’s everywhere, and it’s all the same. And it takes up alien cultures and digests them and shits them out in a homogenous building-block shape that fits seamlessly into the vast blank wall of the monoculture. This is the future. This is what we built.”

In a monoculture, it’s impossible to create any subculture that stands in opposition to the mainstream ... because the mainstream simply *appropriates* it. I’m not talking about appropriation in the corporate/capitalist sense, where the signifiers of alternative culture are used to

sell everything from German cars to Tom’s of Maine toothpaste. That’s nothing new. What’s weird about the monoculture is that it actually *embraces* subcultures and makes them part of the global mainstream at a far greater speed than has ever been achieved before. Even anti-consumerism is acceptable; check out the circulation of *Adbusters* in any given month.

Put it another way: it’s impossible to be weird anymore, because being weird is generally acceptable, and if something is generally acceptable, it is, by definition, not weird.

The tattoo and body modification culture is one great example. It’s easy to forget that twenty years ago, having your arms sleeved in ink was *really weird*. It was pretty much the province of bikers and convicts and punkers who didn’t expect to ever hold a straight job. The same held for piercings. I was still getting shit in the early nineties for having a *single earring* (in my left ear, because according to the commonly held wisdom back then, having an earring in your right ear meant you were queer; and in 1991, being called *queer* was still a reason to throw fists, at least where I lived—something else that has, by and large, changed dramatically). The only people with facial piercings were circus freaks.

Now, everybody has tattoos and piercings, including my mom. The tattoo parlor has gone from being in the back alley of the worst part of town to being a high-end boutique affair. Sorority girls have full back tattoos and clit piercings nd still manage to be completely dull.

You may be thinking, “Yeah, but that *always* happens. I mean, it used to be weird for men to have long hair, too.” True. But tattoos have been around for a very long time, and in the West at least there has *never* been a period when tattoos were so generally culturally acceptable. Nor was it ever as acceptable for Caucasians to sport dreads and mohawks, or dye spots into their hair ... at the same time that it’s totally hip to wear your hair like a fifties’ businessman or a sixties’ acid dealer or a seventies’ band roadie or a eighties’ yuppie. It’s as acceptable for women to dress in halter tops and corsets as it is for them to wear ankle-length floral print dresses, or a combination of both. What we are seeing, for maybe the first time in history, is a world in which *everything* is acceptable.

Not to everybody, of course. There are still vast swaths of humanity both within and without the monoculture who profess outrage over the “moral” decline of Western civilization—Islamic and Christian conservatives, mostly. But by and large, the monoculture ignores these people, partially because they don’t tend to be particularly good consumers, and therefore are largely invisible to the capitalism that drives the monoculture, and partially because they’re just not a whole lot of fun. “Fuck ‘em if they can’t take a joke” seems to be our collective postmodernist motto.

In fact, in some sense, these people make up the only real counterculture left, rejecting and rejected by society, free of what Neal Stephenson once called the







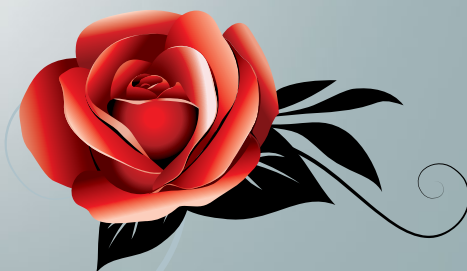


*El Día de los Muertos* (the Day of the Dead) is a vibrant Mexican ritual with roots stretching back thousands of years. Although the holiday now takes place in conjunction with the Catholic observance of All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day, anthropologists have traced its origins back to pre-Columbian times, when an Aztec festival dedicated to the goddess Mictecacihuatl was celebrated for a full month every summer. Queen of the Aztec underworld, Mictecacihuatl ruled over the afterlife with her husband, King Mictlantecuhltli (god of spiders, owls, bats, and the eleventh hour). Modern celebrants believe that long since the blending of old Aztec ways with the cultural and religious traditions of the Spanish conquistadors, Mictlantecuhltli has continued to preside over all festivals for the dead, and to protect their bones.

From the thirty-first of October through November second, a rich musk of incense, marigolds, burnt sugar, *pan de muertos*, candle wax, remembrance and celebration hangs in the air above Mexican cemeteries. Colorful *papel picado* banners rustle in the breeze. Children, wearing wooden skull masks (called *calacas*), dart through rows of tombstones, call out to one another in taunting singsong, "*la muerte es flaca y no puede conmigo*." ("Death is skinny and she can't carry me.") Relatives place the portraits of departed souls at the centers of elaborate altars called *ofrendas*. Handmade sugar skulls, the names of dead loved ones written on their foreheads, are devoured by kith and kin. These are called *calaveras de azúcar*, and their sweetness is tempered with the salt of old tears. Parades, picnics, toasts, music, dancing, and laughter all serve to honor lives well-lived, and offer teasing homage to *la dama de la muerte*, who, it is said, is always watching, walking among her children, and grinning like a skull.

**RESEARCH** Meredith Yayanos

Photographs, outfits and hairstyling by Texas-based Gayla Partridge, who combines the sticky-sweet aesthetic of the pinup era with the autumnal opulence of *El Día de los Muertos*. Makeup & model: Lisa Naeyaert.







FROM MY ROTTING BODY,  
FLOWERS SHALL GROW AND LIVE IN  
THEM AND THAT IS ETERNITY.  
-EDVARD MUNCH





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# Hauntings: The Science of Ghosts

by Mark Powell

It's a crisp, sunny morning in early spring when Coilhouse boards a train to Edinburgh—precisely the sort of weather you don't want when you're headed some 250 miles north to the Scottish capital for a curious-sounding conference on spook hunting organized by Professor Richard Wiseman. Happily, by the time the train pulls up at the city's central Waverley station some four hours later, the sky has hunched itself into a more satisfying pall. We wind our way up overcast cobbled streets and cut through dank, gloomy passageways as an oily slick of raincoats the worn flagstones.

A psychologist, magician, and author, Wiseman has spent the better part of his career probing the less well-lit corners of popular science. He's a public face amidst the oft-shrouded investigative avenues of anomaly, with a string of high-profile media appearances to his name and a substantial following via such online outlets as his own heavily subscribed blog, YouTube, and Twitter. The title of his latest book (which he describes as “the curious science of everyday life, including the psychology of lying, love, and laughter”) is *Quirkology*, which also seems a pretty fitting epithet for the Wiseman-organized conference we now find ourselves scurrying through Edinburgh toward. The actual name of the event we're attending, though, is the understandably less ambiguous, but no less alluring—*Hauntings: The Science of Ghosts*.

Consulting the scrunched PDF printout of the day's schedule for the hundredth time that morning, it's hard to stifle a thrill of ghoulish glee at the location we're heading toward: the University Of Edinburgh's anatomy lecture theater. Not only is our rendezvous suitably steeped in history (the university was founded on a deathbed bequest in 1582, at the height of Elizabeth Tudor's rule), it's also being hosted in arguably one of the more macabre settings therein. The shielded old anatomy quadrangle, located through a narrow entranceway around the back of the theaters themselves, was originally set up as a discrete drop-off

point for cadavers en route to the self-same room we should shortly be sitting in. And, upon finally locating said room, it turns out to be huddled in the direct and significant shadow cast by the oldest purpose-built student union building in the world, the gloomily imposing Teviot Row House. So far, so spooky ...

This being the opening day of festivities at the Edinburgh International Science Festival, there's a noticeable buzz of activity around Teviot Square, queues snaking back and forth across the wind-whipped courtyard. We initially find ourselves ushered into the wrong one, which becomes abundantly clear once we're seated in a cavernous hall, being welcomed to the festival by ASIMO, Honda's humanoid robot spaceman. A lap-clambering exit and much subdued tutting later, we finally find ourselves lodged high up in the overhanging bleachers of the much smaller anatomy theater, where the first of the Hauntings session's hour-long talks—the one conducted by none other than our friend Prof. Wiseman, as it transpires—is well under way.

Titled Investigating “Haunted” Locations: A Scientific Approach, Wiseman's inaugural presentation focuses on quantitative analysis of paranormal phenomena. In simple terms, he explains, this approach involves researchers nosing around locations rumored to be hotspots for anomalous activity. During the process, these researchers map precise sites in which any impressions or experiences whatsoever occur to them (whether felt to be supernatural or, as is more common, completely otherwise). Patterns of correlation between their location notes and previously recorded witness reports are then retrospectively plotted. It's an approach that was pioneered by experimental U.S. psychologist Gertrude R. Schmeidler in such frequently cited papers

as her “Quantitative Investigation of a Haunted House with Sensitives and a Control Group” (*Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 1968), but Wiseman's own digging has taken the idea further.

One of his most discussed investigations thus far has been—fittingly enough, given the city hosting today's conference—into the unsettling-as-all-hell underworld of Edinburgh's South Bridge Vaults. For the uninitiated, the vaults comprise a labyrinthine network of eighteenth-century passages and tunnels burrowing their way beneath the dripping, lichen-flecked arches of the eponymous city-center viaduct. Officially constructed to supply cheap trading space for low-end enterprises (tavern owners, cobblers, besom makers, and the like), their suitability for stowage of illicit goods soon came into play. Edinburgh's notorious wave of late-Georgian serial killings, eventually pegged on Irish immigrants William Burke and William Hare, who sold the corpses for black-market dissection material, is broadly reckoned to have involved the vaults as a makeshift form of cold storage.

The oppressive damp and gloom of these cramped underground caverns gradually forced its lurid array of entrepreneurs, opportunists, and poverty-stricken denizens out. By around 1820, the vaults had all but been abandoned. Little was known of their checkered and populous history until they were fully excavated in the mid-nineties. Today a company called City of the Dead organizes tours led by vaguely gothed-up vault guides, taking small groups of nervously giggling visitors down into these chilly, candlelit corridors and caves. Almost too predictably, many emerge blinking into the daylight bustle of central Edinburgh with reports of unexplained experiences or sensations. It's easy to see how the vaults would be parapsychology catnip to Wiseman et al, who sure enough coaxed a control group down into the chiseled-out murk for one of their quantitative investigations in 2001.

As Wiseman's *Hauntings* talk reveals, his findings were more or less consistent with his pre-experiment hypothesis. To paraphrase very roughly, “Those who went in wanting or expecting to experience something generally did.” Although the assembled volunteers were carefully selected so as to be unaware of any specifics regarding the vaults' reputation, Wiseman says he was able to spot a marked relationship between the numbers within the party who expressed prior belief in ghosts and those reporting unaccountable experiences afterwards.

More relevant to *Investigating “Haunted” Locations: A Scientific Approach*, however, were two additional post-vaults observations: firstly, that more experiences were reported in areas with existing track records of producing them; and



A ghostly stereo card published in 1893 by Littleton View Company, titled The Haunted Lovers. (Wilgus Collection.)



Mumler's portrait of Captain R. Montgomery of Hodgson Mills, Maine. The girl holding the flower to his face is said to be a likeness of his dead daughter. (Wilgus Collection)





*"The anatomy lecture theater stood in the direct and significant shadow cast by the oldest purpose-built student union building in the world, the gloomily imposing Teviot Row House. So far, so spooky..."*



An exhibition of 'Pepper's Ghost' in the theater, circa 1865. This optical effect using mirrors was invented by Henry Dircks and further developed by John Henry Pepper. Published in 'The World of Wonders'. (Photo by Archive Photos/Getty Images.)

secondly, that these areas tended to be marked by "certain environmental attributes, such as air movement and visual appearance." It's via this route that Wiseman introduces us to the fashionable idea of environmental theories of haunting, wherein factors like very low-level seismic activity, underground water flow, or imperceptible audio frequencies can be responsible for what many people interpret as supernatural phenomena. (One post-conference blogger argued that a plea for skeptics to take this idea seriously had been the very crux of Wiseman's session. We wouldn't go that far, but it was certainly a key branch of what we felt had been a reasonably open-minded approach.)

That opening discussion had been a lively one, and in retrospect, the snappy, multimedia-peppered delivery style pretty much set the tone for the rest of the conference. For better or worse, this evidently isn't going to be a day of hardcore scientific stone-turning, doused in a bewildering array of lofty references and clanking with Ichabod Crane-esque spook-chasing paraphernalia. In fact, the closest we get to the latter is probably a historically focused segment delivered by the thoroughly engaging Gordon Rutter, entitled *Imaging the Impossible: The Truth about Spirit Photography*.

This does, of course, prove to be a somewhat imaginative title, and what we actually end up with is a massively entertaining slideshow of variously debunked hoaxes. Photographer Rutter is the

founder of the Edinburgh Fortean Society and head of the Charles Fort Institute, so he comes with pretty impeccable credentials and a clear passion for this sort of thing. That doesn't stop him, however, from sniping some of the weaker fakes with Sahara-level dryness. Infamous Victorian faker William H. Mumler comes in for a particularly indelicate ribbing via a bite-sized account of his faintly ludicrous riches-to-rags life story: a Bostonian jeweller turned epic showboating huckster, he's generally agreed by modern historians to have stumbled across the then-little-known art of double exposure sometime in the early 1860s.

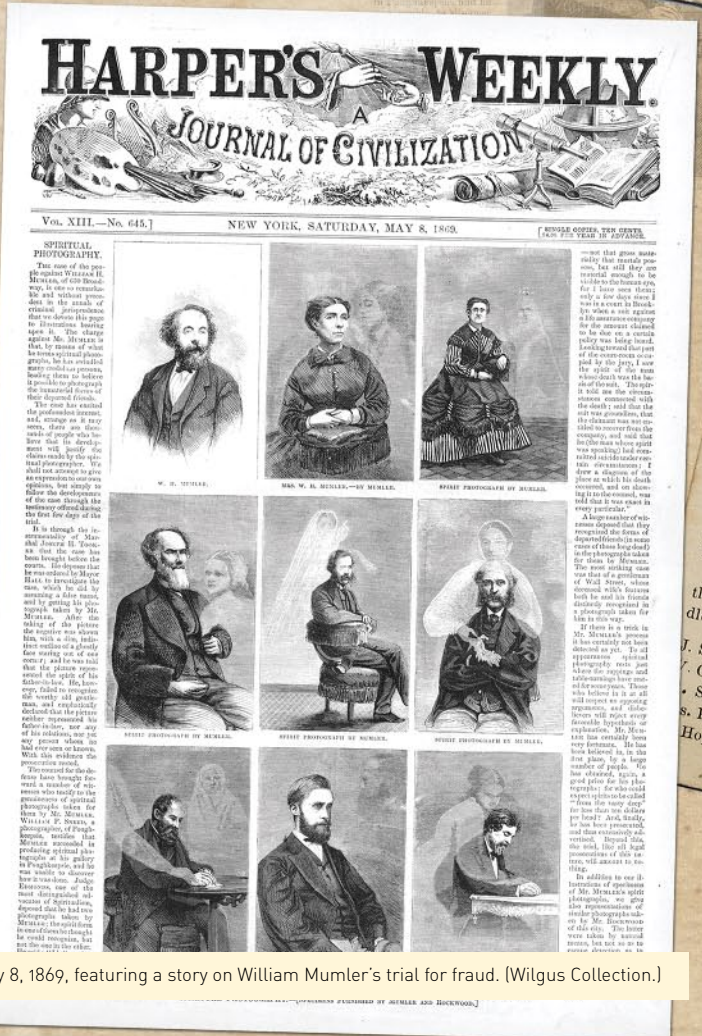
Mumler's "spirit photography" career, we learn, began to capitalise almost immediately on the highly serendipitous timing of the American Civil War and the legions of recently bereaved, highly impressionable relatives left in its wake. His reputation boomed, and for a while, he plied a roaring trade amongst some serious society figures. His best-known shot was taken of Mary Todd Lincoln, framed in the background by the milky, doting "ghost" of her late husband, Abraham—but it wouldn't last forever. Eventually testified against in a fraud trial by P. T. Barnum (whose motives, Rutter notes sarcastically, were of course entirely pure), Mumler was acquitted at length, but his reputation and career were left in tatters—unlike his pictures, of which a decent number make it on to the *Hauntings* projector during the course of the presentation.





A rare tintype (or ferrotype) spirit photograph from the Wilgus Collection. Photographer, corporeal and non-corporeal subjects unknown.

From the Wilgus Collection, an intriguing 1875 carte-de-visite. The photographer, Jay J. Hartman, was conducted by a panel of sixteen "respectable, intelligent gentlemen" in a photography gallery he had never visited before the test, with a plate he never touched, and developed in a darkroom he did not enter. He merely rested his hand on the camera during the exposure.



Harper's Weekly for May 8, 1869, featuring a story on William Mumler's trial for fraud. (Wilgus Collection.)

For the less cynical pockets of today's impressively diverse audience, time is made between sessions for some less cut-and-dried examples of puzzling portraiture in the form of a light-hearted, submission-based contest. In the weeks prior to the conference, Wiseman had collected entries of allegedly "ghostly" photographs. The resulting website, [www.scienceofghosts.com](http://www.scienceofghosts.com), had in fact been picked up by several international newspapers in the run-up to the event, and 'winner Christopher Aitchison was on hand to give a brief talk about the unusual shot he'd grabbed during a visit to East Lothian's Tantallon Castle in May 2006. Wiseman, Aitchison, University of Edinburgh psychologist Dr. Caroline Watt, and Alex Pryce of Edinburgh Skeptics Society had actually ventured back out to the castle in preparation for this segment, staging an attempt to recreate Aitchison's image of a mysterious figure loitering in a ruined window beneath a high parapet. Whether or not the result, revealed at the end of Aitchison's presentation, offers much for the non-skeptics in attendance is debatable—it looks a worryingly good match for the original from where we're sitting—but the photographer remains pragmatic and sporting throughout.

It's fair to say, in fact, that a general leaning towards unabashed skepticism is very much the flavor of the day; this is, after all, Edinburgh Science Festival, and sure enough, the afternoon sessions gradually delve deeper into the psychology-meets-technology art of hand-crafted phantasmagoria. *Dialogue with the Dead: Creating Ghosts for Television* is perhaps the most overtly skeptic-satisfying, in which screenwriter Stephen Volk lays his staunch non-believer cards on the table while recounting his experiences of penning some fondly remembered spook-themed shows over the last two or three decades.

Of these, his UK TV project *Ghostwatch* is the one that causes an audible ripple of interest around the *Hauntings* lecture theater. This hoax documentary masqueraded as a live broadcast, and although screened post-watershed on Halloween night 1992, it was construed by many as having been aimed at a teenage audience due to the presence of well-known children's presenter Sarah Green in the main reporter role. (Green herself, it was further noted, had also alluded on pre-watershed TV to the upcoming project being a kind of reality show.) Despite a cast list for the program being clearly published in numerous listings magazines, the perceived ambiguity over whether or not events broadcast were really happening or not caused near-implausible consternation up and down the country. The BBC were censured in the wake of *Ghostwatch* and held culpable for all manner of ill effects. The never-to-be-repeated show instantly passed into cult TV folklore.

Volk's lecture sits nicely alongside an earlier segment by the aforementioned Dr. Watt, a prominent staff member of Edinburgh's renowned Koestler Psychology Unit. Under the equally unflinching title *Things That Go Bump in the Mind: The Psychology of Apparition*, Watt races through a quick layperson's guide to parapsychology, brainwave patterns, and common quirks of perception. Within her restrictive time budget, she uses some familiar and not-so-familiar optical illusions to scratch the surface of ideas about audiovisual processing anomalies that could, when applied to a suitable set of real-life circumstances, be misread as compelling evidence for some alarming paranormal phenomena.

Early evening outside the University of Edinburgh brings out a creeping cast of murky shadows, by now more or less consuming the courtyard off which the anatomy lecture theater lies. Languid curls of cigarette vapor absorb the orange glow of a wrought iron street lamp, beneath which conference-goers shrink from the newly determined drizzle in a narrow, neo-gothic archway. It's an appropriately theatrical image, all things considered, to set up the talk we'd possibly been most looking forward to all day. *Grappling with Ghosts: Staging Ghost Effects in the Modern Theater* doesn't fail to deliver, with illusionist and magical consultant (best job title ever?) Paul Kieve whisking us through a potted history of smoke and mirrors in the most literal sense. As expected, a significant chunk of his session is devoted to introducing Victorian SFX visionary John Henry Pepper, whose greatest achievement—the staple stage-spook effect that would come to be known as Pepper's Ghost—drew much from the lesser-known

but equally enterprising work of inventor Henry Dircks' self-titled Dircksian Phantasmagoria.

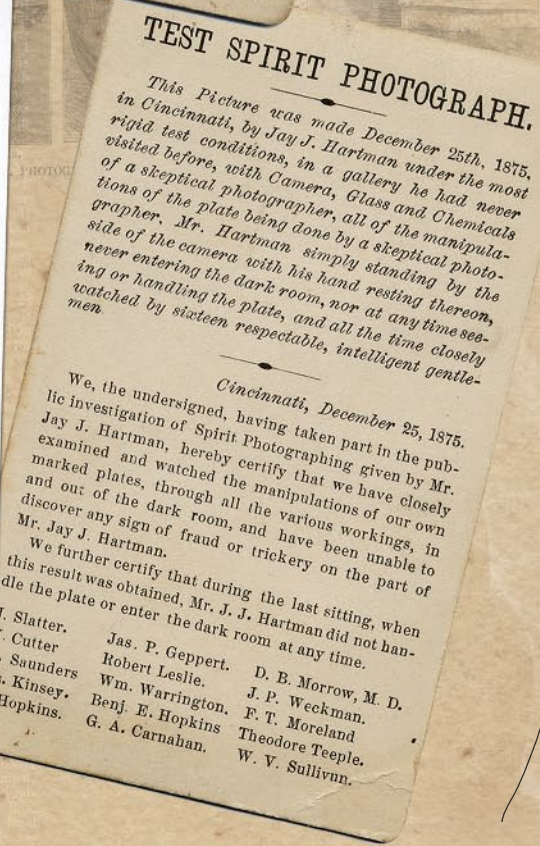
The Pepper's Ghost illusion, Kieve points out, will be familiar to anyone who's ever been carted around the Haunted Mansion ride at a Disney resort. Pepper's ghosts are the ones pirouetting translucently in the ballroom, with objects behind them clearly visible through the spectral pallor of their intangible torsos. In short, we're told, these spectral superstars aren't created using hi-tech holographic projections or intricate lighting effects thrown on to a flimsy vapor, as many might imagine. They are, in fact, mere reflections bouncing off an angled and polished glass surface, while the actual objects being reflected are tucked neatly away out of the viewer's line of sight. As such, notes Kieve, with Santa-debunking frankness, anyone climbing down into that Haunted Mansion ballroom and turning to look beneath the cars passing overhead would see the physical marionettes reflected by the illusion spinning away in perpetuity, solid as rocks. An interesting metaphysical quandary for them.

Pepper, a lecturer in chemistry at the time of his epoch-defining development, perfected this illusion in 1862, after witnessing a working example of the Dircksian Phantasmagoria in a display booth at London's Royal Polytechnic science fair. Dircks' idea, although created with the stage very much in mind, had resolutely failed to set the theater world alight due to the colossal impracticality of his original design. The more academic Pepper spotted an easy way to simplify and streamline the effect, saving interested venues thousands of pounds in remodeling costs, and the rest is century-spanning theatrical history. To his eternal credit, Pepper tried doggedly to see Dircks attributed for the original concept, but for some reason, we can't fathom—Dircksian Phantasmagoria is clearly the more pleasurable name to flick off the tongue—that Pepper's Ghost title stuck.

One further session follows, involving regular television talking head Dr. Ciaran O'Keeffe recounting a clutch of on-set anecdotes from Living TV's *Most Haunted* hokefest. It's predominantly audience Q&A-based, and although good fun, any especially incisive questions are gently deflected. O'Keeffe proves himself to be a dexterous raconteur indeed, entertaining on the one hand while neglecting to reveal anything we hadn't already assumed—or anything at all, really—about primetime celebrity mediums. It's a spirited (indeed) end to the day, though, and one that finds conference attendees washing out into that previously ominous-looking courtyard on a wave of buoyant and bubbling chatter.

And, with that, *Hauntings* disappears in a figurative puff of stage smoke. Or possibly a bout of low-level seismic activity. Or some wily photographic doctoring. Either way, it drifts off into the ether, leaving only the rather more earthly delights of Saturday night Edinburgh in its wake. Did we learn anything? Well, we certainly didn't learn that the validity or otherwise of so-called supernatural goings-on can be established purely through the application of stalwart scientific principles. Neither did we learn much about our fellow conference attendees, the interesting-looking bunch scattered around those looping lecture theater balconies, all peering down into the pit wherein opposing forces of belief and skepticism duked it out for supremacy.

We did learn, of course, that skepticism is always likely to win at an International Science Festival. Moreover, though, we learned that there's plenty of room within the corridors of academia—both literally, and in terms of the many great and knowledgeable speakers we sat through—for some genuine, earnest discussions on a topic that so often runs aground on derisive snorting or bug-eyed gullibility. Oh, and finally, we learned that the weather won't make a tremendous difference when you're investigating *Hauntings* ... but just to be safe, we'd recommend any and all future spook science be pursued exclusively in central Edinburgh, ideally in early spring.



A dark and mysterious passage in the Edinburgh Vaults, photographed for Mercat Tours.



# in side

“The imagination has no limits; entire universes, multiverses even, fit comfortably inside the human head without breaking it open from within. There’s infinite space inside us all, and it’s there to be explored.”

**Grant Morrison, page 66**

**ILLUSTRATION** Zoetica Ebb







# KRIS KUKSI

## SCULPTING *the* INFINITE

*The* plastic model kit is a mesmerizing childhood artifact. Hours, days are poured into building, painting, and appreciating everything from tiny soldiers and WWII Tiger Tanks to futuristic Cobra helicopters and giant 1:350 Mothras. The models are then combined with outside elements—gigantic toy guns towering from piles of sand skyscrapers on Mars, for instance. Pets are used as unwilling intergalactic transporters and dead insects are put on the tops of plastic soldiers' heads. The childhood whiled away with plastic models is sweet. Kris Kuksi, the sculptor born and raised in Arizona, brings back memories of childhoods spent building plastic models on Mars, giving them new meanings that are as subtle as they are powerful.

Kuksi creates dimensions where spirits of eternal pleasure, flesh, and pain prevail. An army horse wobbles on his hind legs, armed with an AK-47 and a paranoid stare. A gargantuan child in a state of decay devours its tiny human counterparts. Their world is one of animal bones, decaying flesh, broken chair legs, and abandoned tin soldiers—

the realm of the things you step on while stumbling through the night, unaware of the worlds sprawling under your feet.

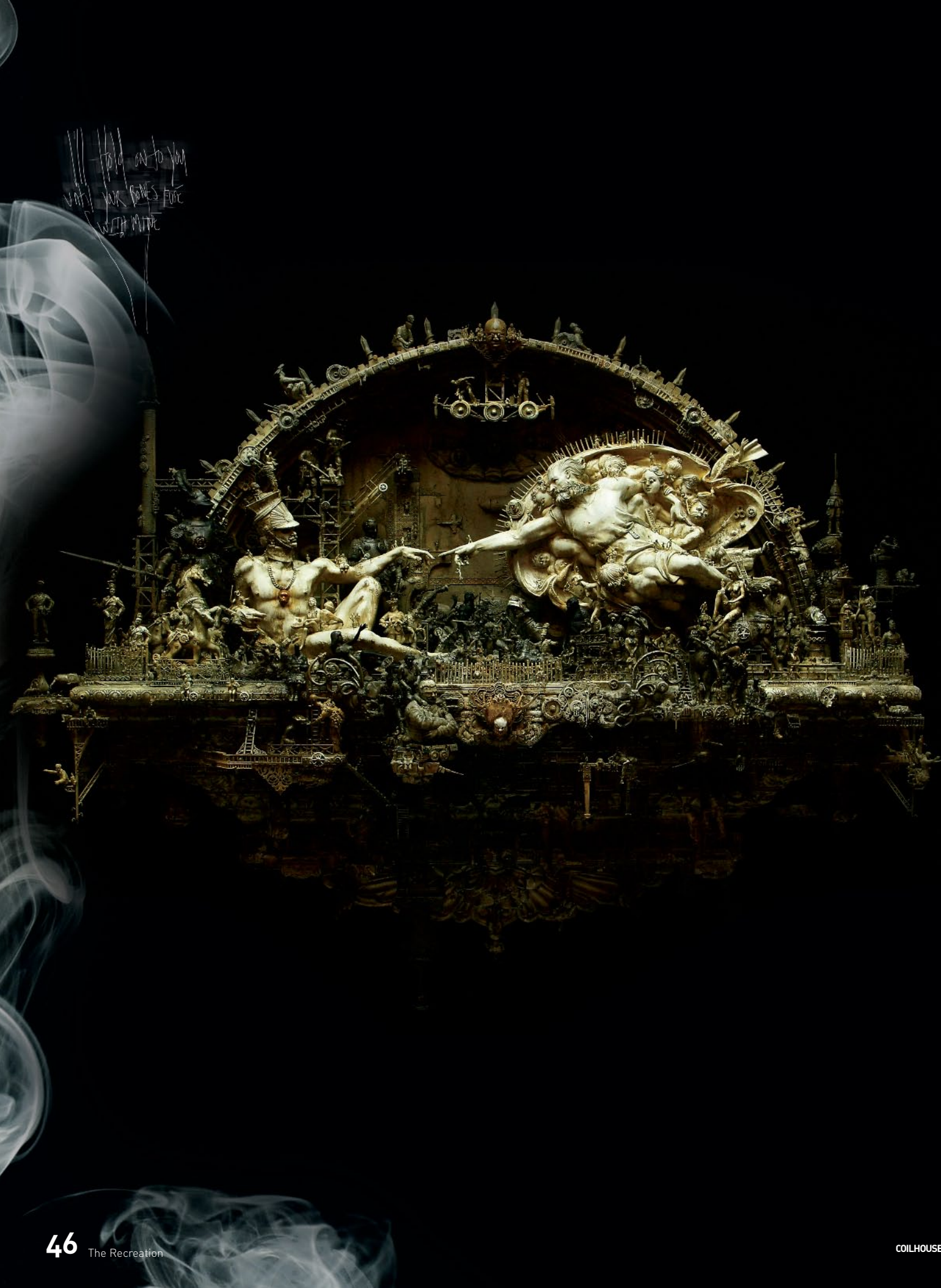
Patiently waiting, they spend lifetimes plotting their escape from the disjointed streets of artists' minds. Only the bravest of creators choose to close their eyes and embrace their deepest visions, disappearing in the chaos and coming back forever changed from within. It's no easy task, but it seems that this is where Kris Kuksi has chosen to go, hoping to understand the void, finding his way to the abandoned intersection of the morbid and the grotesque.

Orbiting outside of time and space, the sculptor catches glimpses of alternate histories and frantically forms them on the never-ending table set in the middle of the empty crossroad. His haunting, desolate landscapes emerge in front of us as his fingers dance to the rhythm of imagination, unceasingly retrieving pieces of the eerie beauty within.

INTRODUCTION Ales Kot

A Tribute to the Maddness of Beethoven





WILL REED MY LOVE  
TWO YOU UNTIL YOUR MISTLES  
WILL FIND ME

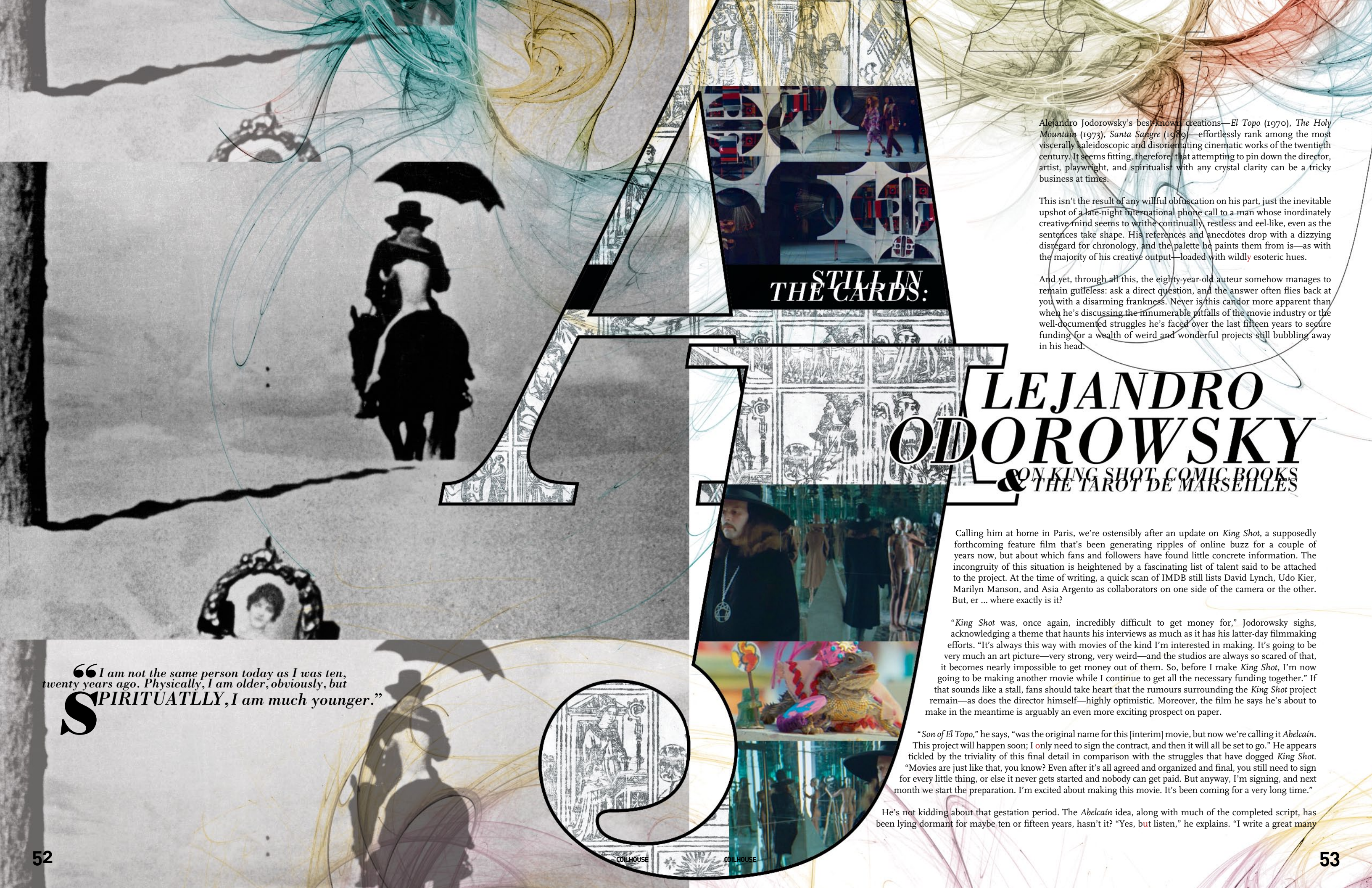












Alejandro Jodorowsky's best-known creations—*El Topo* (1970), *The Holy Mountain* (1973), *Santa Sangre* (1989)—effortlessly rank among the most viscerally kaleidoscopic and disorientating cinematic works of the twentieth century. It seems fitting, therefore, that attempting to pin down the director, artist, playwright, and spiritualist with any crystal clarity can be a tricky business at times.

This isn't the result of any willful obfuscation on his part, just the inevitable upshot of a late-night international phone call to a man whose inordinately creative mind seems to writhe continually, restless and eel-like, even as the sentences take shape. His references and anecdotes drop with a dizzying disregard for chronology, and the palette he paints them from is—as with the majority of his creative output—loaded with wildly esoteric hues.

And yet, through all this, the eighty-year-old auteur somehow manages to remain guileless: ask a direct question, and the answer often flies back at you with a disarming frankness. Never is this candor more apparent than when he's discussing the innumerable pitfalls of the movie industry or the well-documented struggles he's faced over the last fifteen years to secure funding for a wealth of weird and wonderful projects still bubbling away in his head.

STILL IN  
THE CARDS:

# ALEJANDRO ODOROWSKY

& ON KING SHOT, COMIC BOOKS  
AND THE TAROT DE MARSEILLES

Calling him at home in Paris, we're ostensibly after an update on *King Shot*, a supposedly forthcoming feature film that's been generating ripples of online buzz for a couple of years now, but about which fans and followers have found little concrete information. The incongruity of this situation is heightened by a fascinating list of talent said to be attached to the project. At the time of writing, a quick scan of IMDB still lists David Lynch, Udo Kier, Marilyn Manson, and Asia Argento as collaborators on one side of the camera or the other. But, er ... where exactly is it?

"*King Shot* was, once again, incredibly difficult to get money for," Jodorowsky sighs, acknowledging a theme that haunts his interviews as much as it has his latter-day filmmaking efforts. "It's always this way with movies of the kind I'm interested in making. It's going to be very much an art picture—very strong, very weird—and the studios are always so scared of that, it becomes nearly impossible to get money out of them. So, before I make *King Shot*, I'm now going to be making another movie while I continue to get all the necessary funding together." If that sounds like a stall, fans should take heart that the rumours surrounding the *King Shot* project remain—as does the director himself—highly optimistic. Moreover, the film he says he's about to make in the meantime is arguably an even more exciting prospect on paper.

"*Son of El Topo*," he says, "was the original name for this [interim] movie, but now we're calling it *Abelcain*. This project will happen soon; I only need to sign the contract, and then it will all be set to go." He appears tickled by the triviality of this final detail in comparison with the struggles that have dogged *King Shot*. "Movies are just like that, you know? Even after it's all agreed and organized and final, you still need to sign for every little thing, or else it never gets started and nobody can get paid. But anyway, I'm signing, and next month we start the preparation. I'm excited about making this movie. It's been coming for a very long time."

He's not kidding about that gestation period. The *Abelcain* idea, along with much of the completed script, has been lying dormant for maybe ten or fifteen years, hasn't it? "Yes, but listen," he explains. "I write a great many

"I am not the same person today as I was ten, twenty years ago. Physically, I am older, obviously, but SPIRITUATLLY, I am much younger."



cinema scripts, many of which I eventually end up making into comics, because there I can do what I like. This one, though, I definitely wanted to be a picture. The problem always came down to the same difficulties on the economic side, but now we're ready. It's too early to talk about exactly what will happen in the film, but I can tell you that it's about a conflict between two brothers and that we're planning to shoot in Mexico and New Mexico. Also, I can tell you that I have my two leads already, one of whom is my son, Adan dit Adanowsky. We've also got more of a star attached for about ten days' shooting, although that's a little harder to talk about very clearly right now."

A somewhat guarded stance here is pretty understandable: one thing you can confidently say with regard to Jodorowsky's oeuvre is that he doesn't exactly set out to make typical star vehicles. Are we to assume he's fulfilling this big-name obligation under some degree of duress, then? "Hmm. Well, if I had my way, I'd only ever work with actors, not stars—only people that nobody knows. But these days, you can't make a picture if you don't have a famous name [attached]."

"In many ways, the big stars are bringing about the death of cinema," he continues, reverting to his typical candor. "There's too much ego involved, and it's just not possible to work properly that way. It hasn't always been their fault, but I think they've been allowed to pervert the art of making movies. They've become an industry in themselves, an industrial product even." These sorts of sentiments won't come as much of a shock to Jodorowsky aficionados: he once famously described Peter O'Toole, with whom he attempted to work on his fifth feature *The Rainbow Thief* (1990), as "the worst person I ever knew in my life."

The fact that the lion's share of *Abelcain's* script has been penned for over a decade is irrelevant according to the author, who argues that it won't feel like revisiting older pastures because personal history, at least in a creative sense, is essentially non-existent for him. "When I write, the work I produce is not in any way pinned to the year in which I'm making it," he asserts. "I don't even think about anything like that for a second. I'm always writing it in some kind of trance, on a sort of second level; it's not even really me writing it, actually, but more my subconscious. It's always sort of like a dream; I could write it today, you see, just as easily as I could have the same dream tonight."

So, just to confirm then—*Abelcain* will be next up, but as far as he's concerned, *King Shot* will be going ahead once the funding is fully secured? "I believe I will do it, of course," he says, without hesitation. "Manson, Nick Nolte, Kier, Argento ... they have all said yes. It's just not quite possible yet because we didn't finish making the money. Maybe just one more year now, I think. But you know, I'll do *Abelcain* first, and if it's a success then I'll be able to do what I want with *King Shot*. Which I suppose will mean," he laughs, "that then I'll have become commercial, too."

He can, of course, afford to laugh at the suggestion. While Jodorowsky has been accused of many and varied artistic overindulgences, crass commerciality could scarcely be included. His fiercely independent creative drive, itself responsible for the shrugged-off frustrations he's encountered in pursuit of his directorial ambitions, has, over the years, found outlets across various media besides filmmaking. Currently, he has a play in production in Belgium (involving "a school of ventriloquists, with these three old women and some really strange puppets ...") and is still regularly producing some quite majestically oddball comic books.

Indeed, while the latter have long provided a vent for the kinds of ideas that exert the same effect on movieland checkbooks as salt does on a gastropod, his ongoing love affair with the format is clearly about much more than a mere relationship of convenience. "In France, comic books are not seen as they are in America," he contends. "Here, they are much more widely respected. It's seen as a truly valid art form, and there are a lot of very good examples being made that prove it. Lots of very, very good artists here, too. They seem able to make whatever I write come to life in just the way I want." Even more important than this, he says, "they're not interested in drawing supermen."

At any rate, a Superman-style hero tale his current comic book project certainly isn't. In fact, Jodorowsky reveals that he's in the middle of penning a sordid epic about a fourteenth-century papal dynasty involving political espionage, underage incest, and a mafialike cabal of organized quasi-religious criminals. "That sort of thing is very interesting for me," he adds, with masterful understatement; anyone who wouldn't find "that sort of thing" very interesting might want to start checking themselves for a pulse.

It's easy to fall into discussions circling religion and spirituality with Jodorowsky, not least because so many of the most memorable scenes from his films feature gloriously twisted riffs on traditional symbols of piety. "All history is a mixture of politics and religion," he offers by way of explanation. "It's still the same way today; religion is becoming less and less a mystical idea, and more a political one. This is the reality everywhere now, and if you come from Spain or Latin America [he's Chilean-born, of Ukrainian descent] it's even more terrible, because it's so strong there. Growing up in those environments, it's easy to develop a hatred of that priest who tries to arrange and control your whole life."

Accordingly, Jodorowsky says his own much publicized mysticism has never been rooted in religion. He is compelled by a more general, broad-minded openness to spiritual ideas, which is the other reason it's so easy to drift toward these sorts of topics when talking to him: in pursuit of his spiritual curiosity, he's spent a significant portion of his life studying and practicing the Tarot de Marseille.

"There's a very important difference between religion and spirituality," he theorizes. "Religious people take a position behind one idea that they call God and then give it a figure and claim it as their own."

"I just have a very elastic brain, and I switch it over from one piece of work to the next, that's all."

**I don't find that part difficult.**  
**If the talent exists for doing something, you should do it."**









# THROUGH THE MIRROR INTO THE FOREST

## KRISTAMAS KLOUSCH

The German language has a particularly potent word: *sehnsucht*. It describes a nostalgic longing for something elusive, without which the heart doesn't quite feel complete. This yearning is unquenchable, a nagging and constant sense of déjà-vu that often has no basis in personal experience and lingers far longer than expected. It is the very reason why so many people collect old photos of those who bear them no relation or why a trailing note of perfume can unleash a reverie of regrets, dreams, vague memories, and hopes. It is often wistful and tender, but sometimes can be quite menacing and dark. One could write pages upon pages about this longing, this *sehnsucht*, and still come nowhere close to defining the emotion.

The beautiful, sometimes disturbing, and constantly lyrical self-portraits by Canadian artist KRISTAMAS KLOUSCH come a little bit closer to conveying this powerful urge. Like a series of expressive Rorschach tests, they trigger a different set of emotions and recollections with every viewing. One moment, the eye is drawn to a character frozen in an ethereal moment of thought or movement. At a second glance, the

interplay of shadow and light in Klousch's portraits adds a new texture of interpretation. There are notes of inspiration drawn from historical daguerreotypes, spiritualism, mythology, and poetry, as well as works by artists like Francesca Woodman and Cindy Sherman, for whom Klousch acknowledges her admiration. However, these influences don't serve as a template of artistic expression for this young artist. Rather, the threads seem to lead Klousch into a never-ending game of Exquisite Corpse, as her unique visual lexicon shapes dreamy and nightmarish narratives that are very much her own.

Many of Klousch's portraits are untitled, allowing even more opportunity for unique interpretation. She is of many masks and poses: a she-wolf, a blood countess, a prophetic hag, a little girl lost. With so many identities presented through her photos, it becomes an enticing challenge to follow the breadcrumbs to the heart of the girl. WHO IS KRISTAMAS KLOUSCH, REALLY? A question, as her self-portraits indicate, that she seems to ask herself in each image, clearly dissatisfied with just one answer. We hope she never stops asking.

INTRODUCTION Tanya Virodova

















Welcome to the United Kingdom, 1987. Punk has been pronounced dead. Post-punk's momentum is fading away. The glowing red eyes of Margaret Thatcher scan the land, hunting for rebellious minors and homosexuals. Yet somehow, the comics magazine 2000 AD is going through its most creative decade ever. Bringing sci-fi and fantasy concepts together with black humor, ethical dilemmas, and tough attitude, the magazine features some of the finest artistic and literary talent on the British Isles. One of 2000 AD's contributors is Grant Morrison—a straight edge punk interested in magic.

The anarchist superhero book *Zenith*, a few *Doctor Who* comics, and the controversial *New Adventures of Hitler* soon gain the young writer enough respect to become part of the Brit Wave of comics creators. With Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, and Peter Milligan at its forefront, the wave brought fresh innovation to American comics. In 1989, Morrison exploded onto the American comics market with his Jungian-metaphor-infused *Arkham Asylum: The Strange House on a Strange Earth*, which explored Batman, his villains, and their psyches. The commercial success of *Arkham Asylum* was quickly followed by a few creator-owned miniseries and surreal, critically praised runs on DC Entertainment's *Animal Man* and *Doom Patrol*. Both series provided unusual angles for traditional superhero archetypes. The former combined the author's thoughts on animal rights with a META-FICTIONAL approach; the latter took the DC universe's minor "team of FREAKS" and turned their pulp adventure stories into complex commentary on the perception of reality.

Reality and its perception played a significant part in Morrison's work. In 1994, his fifteen-year-long interest in magic led him to create an occult comics artifact where reality and fiction met. Creating a character in his own image, a LETHAL ASSASSIN and SPIRITUAL TERRORIST named King Mob, was a part of Morrison's conscious decision to move comics into new, even more meta-fictional territory, and *The Invisibles* project was born. Stories of creations changing or even destroying their creator are common, but even the tale of Frankenstein's monster pales in comparison to how Morrison was affected by *The Invisibles*. Claiming to be a victim of alien abduction in Kathmandu, the writer started to feed his renewed understanding of the space-time continuum into his work. In a matter of a few months, the characters from *The Invisibles* emerged into the real world, and Morrison himself encountered replications of the strange situations and illnesses he'd inflicted on King Mob. Chronicling the impact of magic on his life in *The Invisibles*, Grant Morrison opened minds across the globe and became a counterculture hero.

In the last decade, Grant Morrison has oscillated between bringing new life to established characters and experimenting with creator-owned projects that have seemingly no boundaries. His folk-tale-inspired *All-Star Superman* has won numerous Eisner and Harvey Awards, the two most prestigious awards in the comics industry. *The Filth*, a captivating Vertigo Comics miniseries that explores the human psyche, proved to be one of his most acclaimed and highest-grossing works. *Final Crisis* showed how a superhero can SAVE THE UNIVERSE with a song. Whatever the story, his goal stays the same.

GRANT MORRISON WANTS TO BLOW YOUR MIND.

# GRANT MORRISON

EMBRACING THE APOCALYPSE



When did you decide that you want to be a writer?

I was six years old, and I won a Bible in a contest. We had to draw Bible scenes; I drew Samson in a top hat, smiting the Israelites or whatever he was famous for, and won. I became obsessed with the idea of that book as an artifact, this thing that belonged to me and had my name on the bookplate inside. I came to reading via that Bible. My mother was a big reader and a fan of science fiction, which was fairly unusual for a working-class woman in Glasgow at the time. She bought me lots of books—Enid Blyton mysteries, adventure stories—and as I read them, I thought, *This is what I want to do. Making up stories is the best thing in the world.* It was amazing, an alternate reality. So I knew then what I wanted to do, and I just started doing it. I drew my own comics, wrote little sci-fi novels, bound them, and presented them to my mother for a pat on the head. I got lucky; I was able to do what I wanted to do from day one. Some people wanted to be spacemen when they were three years old, and they never quite achieved it, but I picked a career path that was well within my meager capabilities.

You seem to be very fond of Superman, Batman, and superheroes in general. What draws you to work in the superhero genre?

I like the primal, allegorical nature of the stories that can be told using these kinds of totemistic hero and villain figures. I also like them because they're indestructible.

We're living through quite cynical, world-weary times. Porn, famine, gossip, "Got Talent" freaks—you can see that look on people's faces, the Wilfred Owen thing—"his face like a devil's sick of sin." The media thrives on bad news and a general low-level buzz of constant feverish anxiety. My rebellion against that kind of obsession with our worst aspects as people is to veer in the other direction and do the positive, utopian superhero stuff as an antidote.

In Pixar films, the animal always wins and gets rewarded for being good or clever. That doesn't happen in the real world. Bright-eyed, brave young foxes get mashed under buses. No matter what your innate sense of justice tells you, there's no guaranteed reward for doing the right thing or being kind or having talent. Cheats often prosper. Reason will not necessarily win the argument. Disillusion and irony abound.

But in stories, heroes can outwit the devil and bring whole dead universes back to life. I like the Satanic arrogance of the writer saying, "Fuck you. I made a better world than you, God! In my universe, the fox gets across the road unscathed, saves a lady fox from hunters, and opens an award-winning woodland bistro."

I love stories that make a point of breaking the rules of real life and have happy endings. I like putting myself into the mind of beings who are smarter and kinder than me. I love the super heroes and creatures of our imagination who were made to never betray us or let us down. No matter how dark it gets, no matter how evil the villains become, they always ultimately win, and that allows us to feel what it would be like if that was true. They remind us what it feels like when we're at our best.

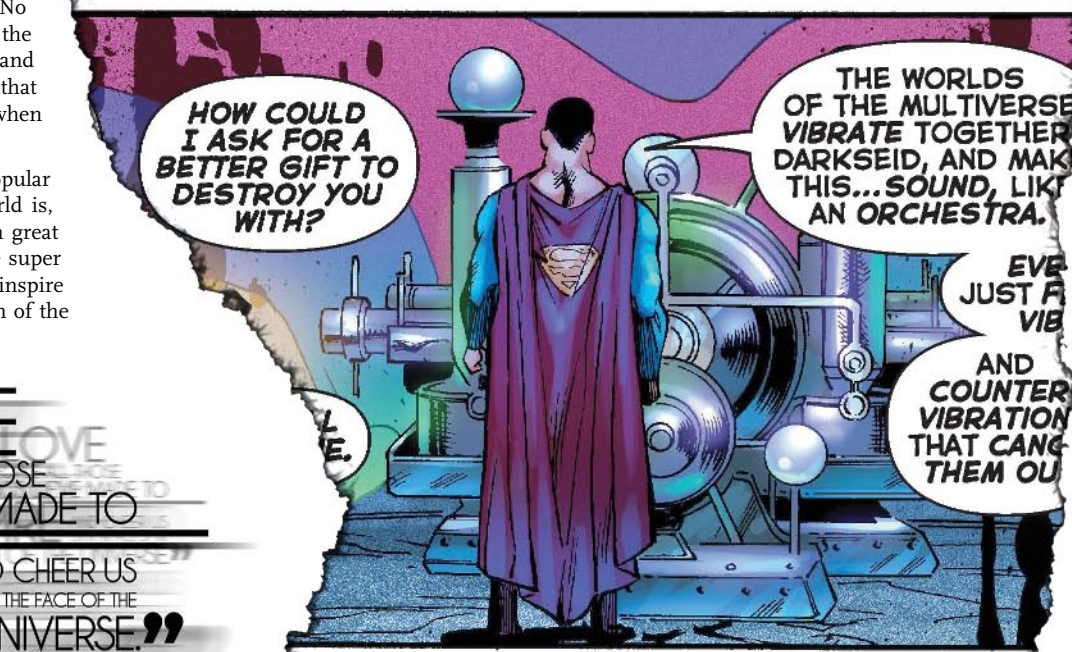
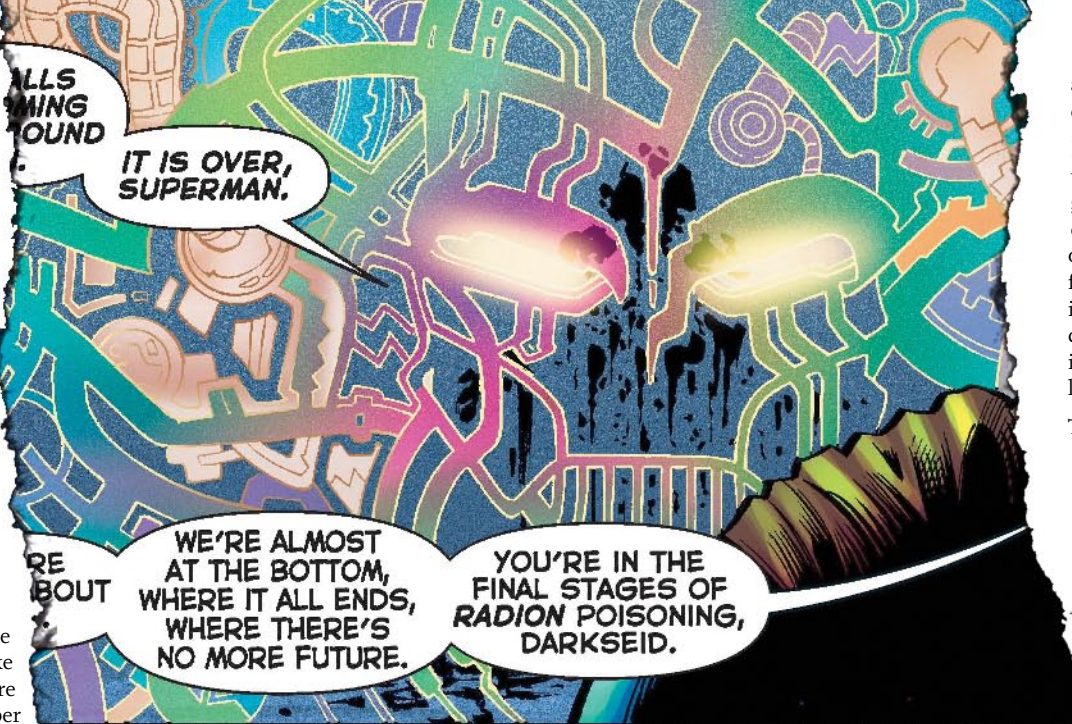
I know what the world wants from its popular entertainment, and I know how the real world is, and I can be a bleak bastard too, but I attach great value to the little cartoon creatures. I love the super people—all those unreal things we've made to inspire and cheer us on in the face of the Heat Death of the Universe.

"I LOVE THE SUPER PEOPLE—ALL THOSE UNREAL THINGS WE'VE MADE TO INSPIRE AND CHEER US ON IN THE FACE OF THE HEAT DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE."

In *Final Crisis*, you deal with the remains of the Bush era, with "death that is life," gods of misery, and absolute submission, unmaking the whole DC universe continuity to the point of total destruction. Then you show readers how the DC universe always resets itself and how Superman always saves the day because it's his basic nature. Do you think our world is repeating itself the same way, being destroyed and rebuilt from the start again?

I think that the world does reset itself. There have been periodic mass extinctions, where it must have looked like life on Earth would never recover. And still the Earth comes back with something new. It's not the planet we have to worry about but ourselves. And tigers. I'll really miss tigers.

You have to watch for hysteria. Scientists are only human, too, but they do say we might be commencing a new period of extinctions that will pretty much wipe out diversity on our planet for a while—not only because of what humans are doing to change the large-scale environment but also simply because it's probably



about time for one. The human and the mammal continuities are about to be shut down, and there's going to be a new insect or cephalopod continuity, apparently.

For a long time, I hoped that we—the mammals, the humans—would be the ones to get it together and spread Earth's life to the stars. We're quite organized and good with our hands; we're able to make symbols that talk inside our heads. We can think of something and make it happen; we can build suits that allow us to fly or to go under water. But the last couple of hundred years have been quite brutal for the planetary life form, the biota. It's a strange thing to see the human project in such danger. *Final Crisis* was trying to express that feeling, to see how Superman deals with it. You know, every time you turn on the screen, someone's yelling that it's the end of the world and you're personally responsible somehow because you left the light on.

The collective story we seem to be telling ourselves in the West right now is that we're all fucked and, not only that, we deserve it. Nobody wants to build starships; everyone only wants to be famous, famous, famous, and then die in a welter of drugs and emotional breakdown. What happened to us? Why does a culture that once looked up to engineers, scientists, astronauts, great artists, and authors now look to showbiz people as role models—the most neurotic, self-centered, obsessive, and bizarre human beings on the planet?

I was thinking about the horrible feeling of what it must be like to be a kid now, to be told that the planet's doomed and that what ecological catastrophe doesn't get, overpopulation or obesity will. "*Darkseid Says.*" Although a poll in Britain just revealed that 88 percent of the teenage boys represented are happy and positive about their futures, so perhaps it'll be that perpetually youthful sense of personal invulnerability that sees us through in the end.

Maybe our world is reconstructing itself again, to be something new and possibly even stronger.

Yeah, because it always does. Hopefully that's what it is, and we're going through this period temporarily and *Star Trek* or *The Legion of Super-Heroes* is just around the corner! I'm getting grumpier because I wanted to see it happen in my lifetime; I was promised domed cities on Mars by 1985.

It seems that *Final Crisis* shares its core with *2001: A Space Odyssey*, namely extraterrestrials sharing their knowledge with humanity. Metron gives man fire; the monolith gives man tools and space travel. Was the similarity intentional? That's one of my top three favorite movies and one of the greatest pieces of art the human race has ever produced. It's up there with the Sistine Chapel for me. The fire in *Final Crisis* represents inspiration. Fire itself is a generator of concepts, like throwing bones on the ground or divining tea leaves, looking at clouds, looking at water, creating random visual configurations that stimulate creativity. You look into the fire and it's a moving screen; you see little beings, you see jumping figures or landscapes that trigger associations. There's a lot to see if you sit and stare for a while. People have always told stories and dreamed their dreams around campfires and hearths. Fire becomes the first weapon, the first artwork, because it inspires creativity and is that bridge between thought and matter. That first weapon, the flame, becomes the Green Lantern ring in the DC universe of superheroes. The ring that turns thoughts into things ultimately becomes the Miracle Machine in *Final Crisis*, the god machine that can rewrite all reality with a single wish. It's fire evolved into an ultimate condition.

What about your new *Batman and Robin* title? How different is it from past takes on the character?

The idea was to take the pop art/psychedelic elements of the *Batman* TV show from the sixties and fuse that with a kind of David Lynch sensibility. And Robin is now Batman, and Batman's evil son is now Robin, so the dynamic is very different and quite fresh.

It took me years to take Batman apart and put him together again. You can't make big changes overnight to such an enduring and popular icon, so you have to go in for the long haul and remake it piece by piece.

Having new characters in the roles of Batman and Robin makes a difference. There's more humor and sarcasm. It can be creepy and funny at the same time. Ghostly, horrible things can happen, but it's okay; you can laugh



about it because Batman will sort it out. I have a great story for it, a big story picking up some of the more occult stuff that I liked about *Batman R.I.P.* and wanted to go back to. My work on Batman for the last few years has been one huge, extended, definitive story and *Batman and Robin* is the latest chapter. My plan is to take the franchise in another new direction in 2010.

When artists talk about their ideas, they sometimes talk about various places they get them from—Alan Moore talks about Ideaspace, for example. Do you have any special place like that? Is there anything you can you recommend to people who'd like to open up their imagination? What Moore calls Ideaspace is also what Scarlett Thomas calls Mindspace, or the Troposphere, in her great book *The End of Mr. Y*, which I just read. It's what Australian Aborigines call Dreamtime and the Western occult tradition calls the Astral Plane. Most of us are more familiar with it as the imagination and tend to take it for granted or use it in a limited way.

If you want to exercise that faculty more, all you have to do is stop what you're doing for a moment and *daydream*.



Try this: imagine yourself going to Paris, flying there at supersonic speeds perhaps or teleporting onto the Champs-Élysées. Can you see it? What you're seeing will be based on personal recollections if you've been there and/or a combination of pictures or movies you've seen. Is the Arc de Triomphe behind or ahead of you? What's on your right? What are you wearing? Is it day or night? What's the weather like? And so on. This is what they're talking about when they say "astral travel."

What you're seeing in your head may not be the real Paris, but who knows, you might be remote viewing. Even if you're not, you'll see some cool stuff that represents *your* unique view of Paris. That's the way to get into it. Lie back and send yourself *someplace*, explore and imagine. There are no rules and no one is judging the performance. Maybe you see Nazi tanks or flying saucers. Where are they going?

What year is it? Now go into a store, look around, pick up items. What items do you see? Are the signs in French or another language? Are

there any gods or devils, angels or aliens around?

Write down what you see and hear on inner excursions like these. Whatever words go through your head, no matter how stupid, nonsensical, filthy, or boring, jot them down. You'll build a massive library of a weird shit from your head. People who use their imaginations for a living and who can spend all day at this become very good at it, just like athletes who exercise regularly; but anyone can stretch their imagination, and the more you use it, the stronger it gets, like a flexed muscle. I spend my days thinking about unreal people doing impossible things, and those thoughts turn into money, which I find quite magical in itself. The imagination has no limits; entire universes, multiverses even, fit comfortably inside the human head without breaking it open from within. It's a kind of tesseract space, which is why I had Bat-Mite say to Batman, "Imagination is the fifth dimension." I meant that literally. There's infinite space inside us all, and it's there to be explored.

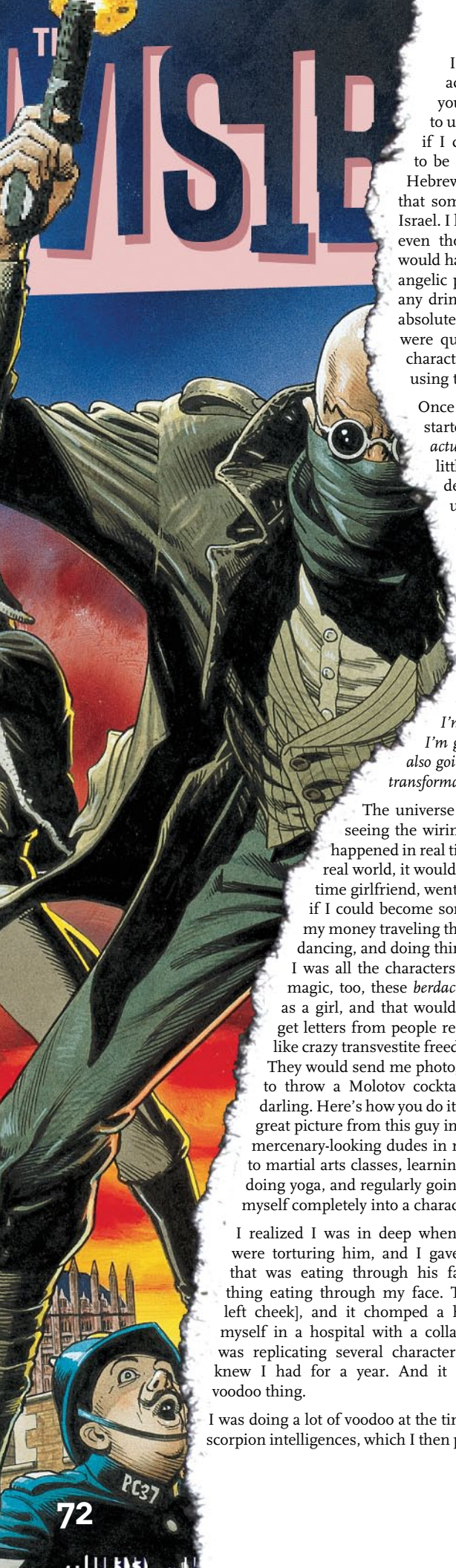
*The Invisibles* was a vehicle through which you explored and successfully altered your life. How was the idea of making magic through comics born in you, and when did you first realize that *The Invisibles* had a lot to say in your life?

I've always been interested in magic; I started to practice when I was nineteen. My uncle had given me a Crowley tarot deck for my birthday, and I got very heavily into that and the accompanying *Book of Thoth* manual. He had a great library of the occult, so I really got into it. I was doing rituals and getting good results; things would happen, which was quite surprising, but I didn't understand what



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**TAKING DRUGS IN EXOTIC PLACES,**  
DRINKING, DANCING AND DOING THINGS I'D NEVER DONE BEFORE.  
**I BECAME KING MOB.**  
I WAS ALL THE CHARACTERS IN THE INVISIBLES."





I was dealing with. It takes a long time to actually absorb it, so you do it naturally and you get better without realizing. I thought I had to understand all these Hebrew words at first and if I couldn't memorize them, I was never going to be a magician. Because to me, it was as if these Hebrew words were the magic and not just something that someone layered on top of magic once in ancient Israel. I kept experimenting, thinking I was doing it badly, even though it was working. Weird poltergeist effects would happen, and then I communicated with demonic or angelic presences. And I was totally straight. I didn't take any drink or drugs or coffee when I was young. I was an absolute straight edge punker. The magic and the comics were quite separate then. I'd put magicians and magical characters spouting the jargon into my comics, but I wasn't using the comics themselves as spells until a bit later.

Once the nineties came along, I changed my life and started doing *The Invisibles*. I thought, *I'll do a comic that actually is a magic spell, a narrative sigil*. I had made that little comic book avatar of myself for *Animal Man* and decided to make a better one, a "fiction suit" I could use to live an alternate life in print. I was looking at the old *Flash* comics where the character meets his creators, and I thought, *That's cool. I could modernize this approach*. I was looking at what Neil Gaiman was doing was doing with *Sandman*, because he looked like his character and it was getting attention. Girls loved him because he looked like Morpheus! I thought, *What a wicked idea. Fuse yourself with the character, so if the fans love the character then they actually get to meet him when they meet you. How weird is that?* I thought, *I'm going to turn myself into a comic book character and I'm going to write about my adventures every month. I'm also going to see how it reflects in my own life, as a magical, transformative act*.

The universe of *The Invisibles* was our own but as if we were seeing the wiring underneath, the secret connections. The story happened in real time, and if something significant happened in the real world, it would go into the comic. I'd just split up with my long-time girlfriend, went crazy, and thought this was a perfect time to see if I could become someone else. So I shaved my head and spent all my money traveling the world, taking drugs in exotic places, drinking, dancing, and doing things I'd never done before. I became King Mob. I was all the characters in *The Invisibles*. I was doing all this tranny magic, too, these *berdache* experiments, so I was going out dressed as a girl, and that would feed back into the story. I was stunned to get letters from people reading *The Invisibles* who were the real deal, like crazy transvestite freedom fighters in the jungles of Latin America. They would send me photographs and write, "That's not how you want to throw a Molotov cocktail if you're wearing Dior evening gloves, darling. Here's how you do it without destroying your frock." I still have a great picture from this guy in a dress, standing alongside these hardcore mercenary-looking dudes in military fatigues in the jungle. I was going to martial arts classes, learning Taekwondo and Silat and Jeet Kune Do, doing yoga, and regularly going to Reichian therapy. I was transforming myself completely into a character, into an *Invisibles* agent.

I realized I was in deep when I made King Mob sick. The bad guys were torturing him, and I gave him this necrotizing fasciitis bacteria that was eating through his face. Three months later, I've got this thing eating through my face. That's the scar [points at a scar on his left cheek], and it chomped a hole right through me. Then I found myself in a hospital with a collapsed lung and near-fatal septicemia. I was replicating several characters' injuries. I got an infection nobody knew I had for a year. And it was all part of this whole King Mob voodoo thing.

I was doing a lot of voodoo at the time, and I made contact with these malign scorpion intelligences, which I then put straight into *The Invisibles* because I got



so freaked out after what happened that I thought I better honor them somewhere. They were very serious. They said that they wanted me to become an assassin and were showing me techniques for destroying people's auras, so the victims could become the prey of any stray "astral parasites." They were giving me horrible, detailed instructions—not for how to kill human beings, but for how to kill their spirits. And I didn't want any part of it. I pulled back and then discovered that all this information they'd given me about themselves was verified by a little research—the scorpions turned out to be the *Famille Zaraguin*, royal insect-gods that actually exist in the pantheon of the Loa. I didn't know about them until I met them.

One night, I was on E doing pretty heavy work with entities from the Dark Side of the Tree of Life, and I realized, *This is all real. I'm living in this world that started out as fiction in my head*. I'm out of my face in six-inch heels, speaking in tongues. My personality had shattered into a menu of options, and this was me as Lord Fanny from *The Invisibles*, basically, who was afraid of nothing and who could put down any demon, no matter how persuasive or terrifying, with a wicked one-liner. Dressing up allowed me to go to some very dark and demonic spaces without fear.

In that state, I did things I normally wouldn't and couldn't do. I can't smoke cigarettes; inhaling tobacco is like being punched in the lung. It's a real Not-Self thing for me. But when I was possessed like this, I did it without any discomfort. So this night, I realized that it was going too far. I was hanging out the window and spewing up after contact with some noxious bastard from the Tunnels of Set and peeling off this PVC thing that was now exactly like split, dried bug skin. I thought, *This is it. This is the moment of transformation. You're gonna die or be reborn. You're gonna tear your fucking skin off and change, or else*. I pulled this thing off, and within a couple of months, I was in a hospital fighting for my life.

After that, I came back and realized what was going on and took more control of it. In *The Invisibles*, starting with volume two, King Mob's really healthy, jumping around a lot, and having sex with Ragged Robin. My own life brightened up considerably at the same time. I began to realize the benefits of having this little magical world where I could make anything happen, so I started to introduce people I wanted to meet. I would put them in the book and suddenly get to meet them in "real" life. Around then, in 1996, I realized that it was really fucking working; there was something happening that was beyond anything I'd expected. From that moment on, my life changed so utterly. My circle of friends became ... international, and the parties started to get really good. And then I met my wife, Kristan, in 2000, just after completing *The Invisibles*, and life got even better.

So that's what *The Invisibles* turned out to be, a magical instrument for improving your life?

*The Invisibles*, at first, was about creating a fantasy network where outsiders could "find the others" as Timothy Leary put it, and then the network became real. Before the internet, it was hard to find a community of like-minded people beyond a couple of friends. *The Invisibles* was an old-fashioned telegraph signal. I wanted *The Invisibles* to be inspirational, like the things that have inspired me. For instance, the bands, the Sex Pistols, Buzzcocks—a lot of these guys could barely play their instruments, but they made me feel brilliant, expressed what it felt like for me to be a teenager. So *The Invisibles* was a kind of handing on of a certain type of energy as mediated through my own experience and trying to share with others some of the things that had helped me change in a positive way. I'm sure many people know that feeling, that the world is much bigger than they tell us in school, the world is much bigger than they tell us in movies, and it's all out there to be uncovered and experienced.

I worked in a civil service office for a one year of my life when I was twenty-one. It was the only job I ever had. I used to go in there every day and do little subversive things. I made up false companies, like weird surrealist outlets that made torture furniture, and put them into the system, or invented entire histories for fictional clients. I would feed them into the system, fuck with it, make things work differently.

I was raised according to strict non-violent principles by my soldier dad, so my stabs at rebellion tended to target ideas rather than objects. That's what *The Invisibles* was about: ontological terrorism. And it was also to say, "Hi, everyone, where are you? I'm here, doing this. Come and say hi and let's talk about all this mad stuff we're into. If we get enough of us, we can change the world."

The people I met through the book were brilliant. There was a girl in New York who was writing her own take on it, and that's where the whole idea of Ragged Robin writing her personal version of *The Invisibles* came from. Everyone I met gave me another piece of the puzzle, a new way of thinking about what I was doing, a new strand to follow. Through *The Invisibles*, I became friends with Douglas Rushkoff and Richard Metzger, Genesis P-Orridge, Paul Laffoley, Howard Bloom—massive influences on my thinking.

You're working on a project called *The New Bible*, with manga-influenced artist Camilla D'Errico. What can you tell us about the project?

I've been looking at blogs, the floating world, the Internet. Anyone can express an opinion, create a world; it's like punk again. Everyone is a star. In *The Invisibles*, I paraphrased Andy Warhol—in the future, everyone will be famous for twenty-four hours of every day—and this is what I was getting at! Same with the "I love Big Brother!" thing, which seems quite prescient now. Rather than it being a scary thing, which it was for the Cold War generation, surveillance has suddenly become desirable. We want cameras; we want to be seen. Fuck privacy. The terror of the previous generation has become the desire of the next one. I wanted to try a new type of comic storytelling that would be a bit like a blog, and that became the idea of *The New Bible*.

It's about the last outsider, about the characters surrounding him, and about the end of the seventh day of creation and what happens next. I'm not gonna tell you anything more than that since it'll be a while before it's out. It's more in the psycho-sci-fi vein of *The Invisibles* and *The Filth*.

Right now, almost the whole civilized world seems to be obsessed with fear and apocalypse scenarios: swine flu, vaccinations that bring heightened possibilities of another deadly disease, Roland Emmerich making more money on death spectacle culture with his 2012 movie, scientists calculating the possibilities of a zombie infestation, survival horror games. Is there anything left to fear? Is humanity shedding the need for fear itself? It shows how well-developed we are that we're able to play with fear—because that's what we choose to consume as entertainment. We still live very secure lives here in the West. We're lucky not to have to deal with real blood and guts. Odd things might happen now and again, but most of us can actually get through our long lives without experiencing extreme violence of any kind. So we choose to play with it. Our entertainment is increasingly based on the real lives of people who do deal with violence on a daily basis: urban gang culture, the criminal underworld, police, the armed forces, etc.

The rest of us are so laid back, luxurious, well-off, and well fed that we can pretend to be working our way up from the gutter to a penthouse or shooting dead men coming at us from the sewers.

As the British Empire began its collapse, it became obsessed with ghost stories and blood and guts and gore: zombies, monsters, dead people, séances, spirits, the occult. So this might be a symptom of the collapse of an empire—the obsession with death and decay, failure and fear. Things people don't want to think about become the subject of entertainment because the subconscious bleeds over into the work of creative people. It bleeds through the pulps and through films and





through underculture to fulfill a hunger for violent dystopian scenarios. So people run around virtual worlds that immunize them against the hideous realization that none of us would last more than thirty seconds in any of the all-out war, crime, or post-nuclear scenarios we love to play in!

#### What do you think will happen in 2012?

Our observations tell us there's a black hole in the center of our galaxy, and in other galaxies, too, so maybe there is a singularity waiting for us in 2012, a spacetime whirlpool that's dragging us towards it on a faster and faster spiral. Everyone you speak to says, "Yeah, time kinda feels like it's speeding up. Last year took a little bit longer to pass than this year." Everyone feels that there is something odd about time, that it's different than it used to be. Is that just how it feels to get older, or is time actually accelerating? There are only a couple of years to go, so we'll soon see if Terrence McKenna was right. Will we experience some unprecedented merging of mind and matter on the morning of December 22, 2012?

The global life form, the biota, of which we're all part, might finally wake up to its true nature and metamorphose from its current larval stage into a higher-dimensional form. The current atmosphere of world conflict, the internal stresses we're seeing right now, are what you'd expect from an entity going through a quickening "adolescent" phase.

We also have among us a vast, dying thought form that lies at the root of a lot of the world's current problems. The god of Islam, the god of Judaism, the god of Christianity are all one and the same being, born in a small, specific geographical region. This Middle-Eastern desert god, let's call him Jehovallah, who walks among us in the form of books of instructions for living, is having some kind of catastrophic schizoid break that involves attacking *himself* right now. His followers make war on one another, in his name! It's as if we're watching that gigantic, supposedly monotheistic god freaking out at

his own ugly face in the mirror and tearing himself apart on the world stage,

making a terrible mess in the process. This stupid, horrific thing they've made, this one-eyed controller, is being slaughtered in front of us by his own followers, and I'd like to think a lot of the fear and the tension are byproducts of that. The monster is dying, and it's thrashing wildly and destructively in its death throes. It'll be interesting to see how that plays out.

What I'd like to see in 2012 is, at the very least, a dawning realization that the entirety of life, when considered as a large-scale process expressed through the fourth dimension of time, is undeniably a single living organism inhabiting a very unusual and unlikely Petri dish of a planet. I'm not looking for alien intervention or the arrival of time machines from the future. I don't have much time for the so-called supernatural. I just hope we wake up to what we actually are and stop behaving like idiots.

So, the apocalypse in 2012? It would be fucking brilliant. I'd love to be here to see that.

**INTRODUCTION** Ales Kot  
**INTERVIEW** Ales Kot and Zoetica Ebb  
**PHOTOGRAPHY** Alan Amato





# LARKIN GRIMM

## ADVANCED SHAPESHIFTER

INTERVIEW Angeliska Polacheck

LARKIN GRIMM IS AN ELEGANT WARRIOR, strong and tall and crowned with unruly ringlets. Her eyes change color, and her calm gaze penetrates even the most fortified defenses with a chthonic wisdom far beyond her twenty-six years.

Her legendary upbringing tends to precede her: she was raised in Memphis, Tennessee, by devotees of the religious cult the Holy Order of MANS. When she was six years old, her family moved to the Blue Ridge region of Georgia, where, as one of five children of folk musicians, Larkin found herself largely left to her own devices. She was a wild mountain witch child who dropped out of public school at age ten, yet went on to attend Yale to study painting and sculpture. Nomadic by nature, she's rambled all over the world, learning the healing arts in Thailand and engaging withentheogens with a shaman in the Alaskan wilderness. She taught herself how to sing and play music during these mind-expanding journeys, locked in dark rooms and deep in the woods, possessed by spirits. She recorded two experimental albums, *Harpoon* and *The Last Tree*, both of which were improvisational and intensely cathartic works.

After corresponding for years, Michael Gira (of Swans and Angels of Light) signed Larkin to his own Young God label and was instrumental in the birth of her latest album, *Parplar*. She says of their time working together, "He has this great ability to make me feel comfortable being my flamboyantly perverse Mary Poppins self, and the songs I've written under his whip are probably the best I've ever come up with, so I am super grateful for this time in my life." Gira's appraisal of Larkin captures her aptly:

"Larkin is a magic woman. She lives in the mountains in north Georgia. She collects bones and smooth stones, and she casts spells. She worships the moon. She is very beautiful, and her voice is like the passionate cry of a beast heard echoing across the mountains just after a tremendous thunderstorm, when the air is alive with electricity. I don't consider her folk, though—she is pre-folk, even pre-music. She is the sound of the eternal mother and the wrath of all women. She goes barefoot everywhere, and her feet are leathery and filthy. She wears jewels, glitter, and glistening insects in her hair. She's great!"

In a time when our culture seems to openly scorn but secretly crave magic, Larkin Grimm is an unashamed and forthright power to be reckoned with.

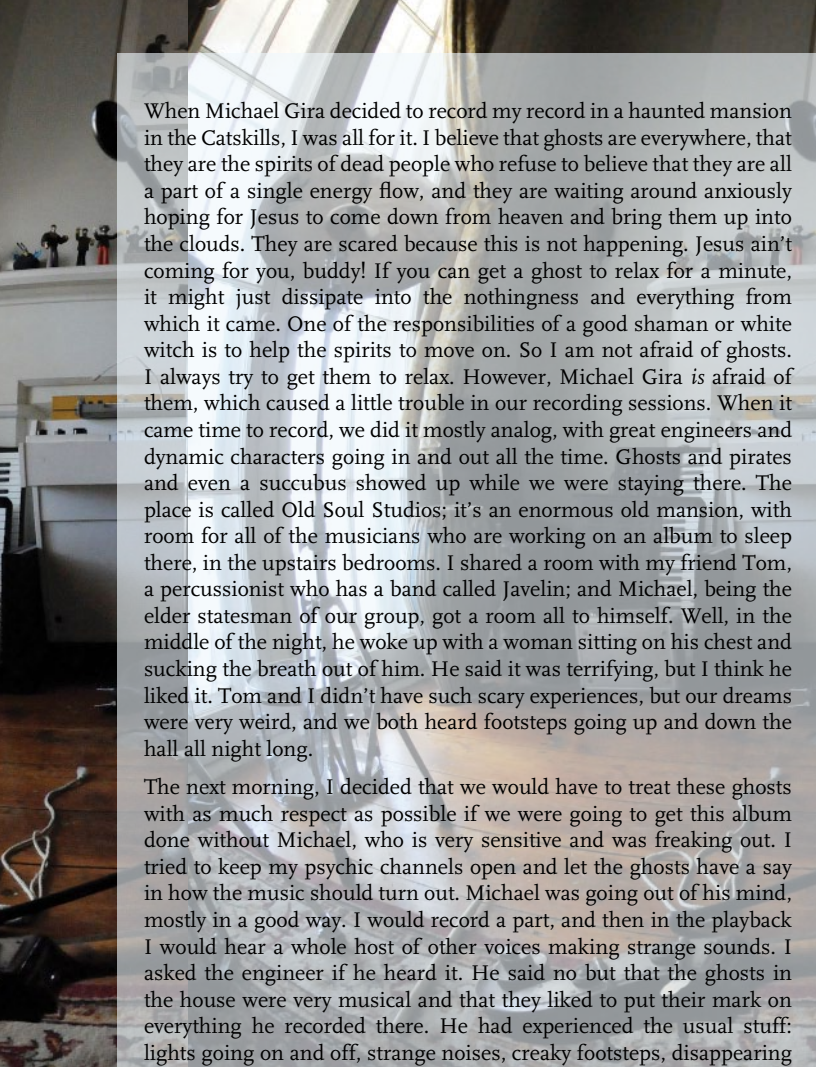
Listening to your first two albums (*Harpoon* and *The Last Tree*), I get the impression that there was something of a strange sea change in both your music and your mode of self-expression, kicking off with *Parplar*. It's an incredibly powerful album, and it's clear that you ventured to some fantastic other worlds while making it. What was that process like? I've read that you recorded the album in a haunted mansion. Did the ghosts put their two cents in?

Well, my first album was incredibly strange. I was still thinking of myself as a visual artist and a noise musician at the time. I had no interest in songwriting back then. There were some elements of folk that came through, though, and on the second album, I tried to explore my folk roots a bit but still avoided song structure. I got the idea in my head that there was an intelligence to the universe that I had tapped into, and now that I was a part of the flow, the universe would take care of me no matter what. I stopped mulling over choices when I had to make a decision and started trusting my gut feelings. Sometimes it would seem like a tree or an animal or an inanimate object would have a very strong opinion about what I should do, and I would often listen to that. If I had no other clues about a decision, I would simply flip a coin. This is how I came to work with Young God Records. My record deal fell right into my lap, and I said yes, since I was in the habit of saying yes to everything. The big change came when I met Michael Gira and we blew each other's minds and there was a lot of excitement in our exchange of musical ideas. Michael would force me to sit down and listen to these tunes by Bob Dylan and Neil Young and the Beatles, all bands I avoided like the plague before. Of course, I listened to a lot of Swans, as well. He wanted me to write songs so that he could produce them. It was a new thing for me, and definitely an experiment in collaboration. I wrote all of the material, but Michael provided a valuable frame of reference. Of course, those were the pre-recession days, and he had all this money from Devendra [Banhart], and he just spoiled me rotten. I was living in this slum in Providence, Rhode Island, and the label would send me money so that I could write and eat. I was sleeping on the floor in a bare room with a few instruments and a typewriter. I was studying to be a psychic at the time, and the experience was pretty overwhelming. I cut myself off completely from friends and lovers and focused inward, on work and meditation. I was writing songs in my sleep. It was great. I don't think that experience could ever be duplicated. The stars were just aligned in my favor at that moment.

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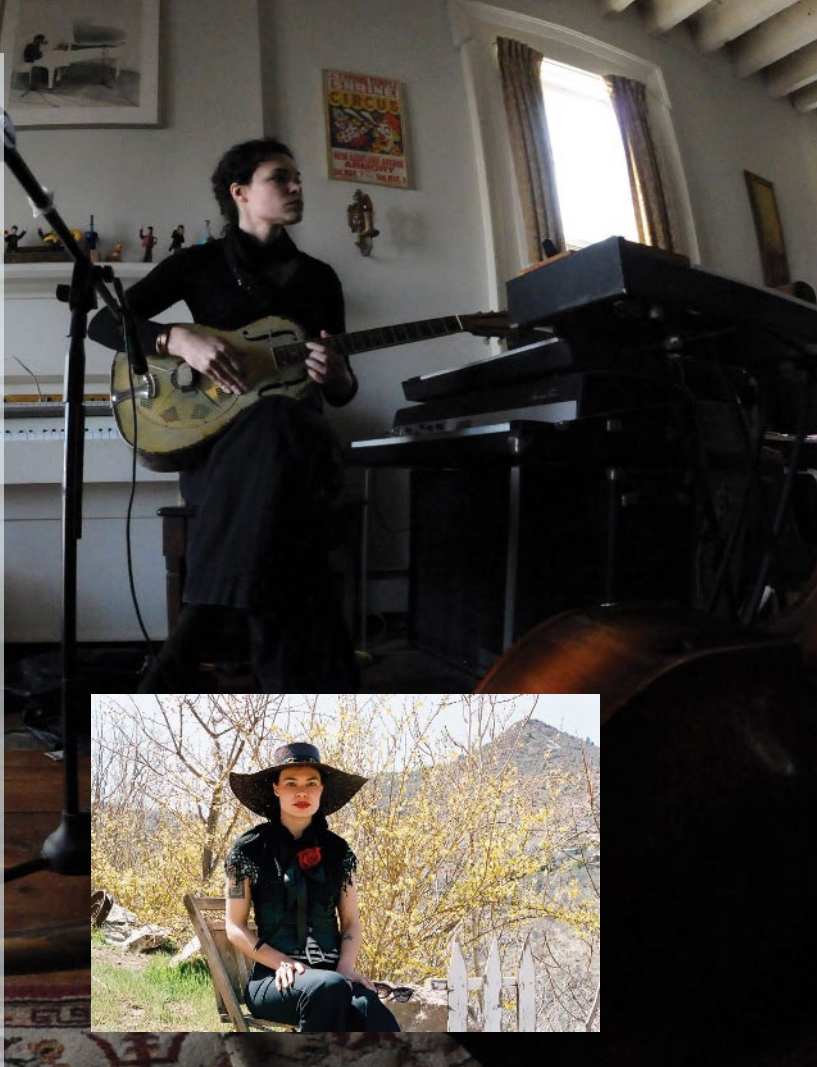


When Michael Gira decided to record my record in a haunted mansion in the Catskills, I was all for it. I believe that ghosts are everywhere, that they are the spirits of dead people who refuse to believe that they are all a part of a single energy flow, and they are waiting around anxiously hoping for Jesus to come down from heaven and bring them up into the clouds. They are scared because this is not happening. Jesus ain't coming for you, buddy! If you can get a ghost to relax for a minute, it might just dissipate into the nothingness and everything from which it came. One of the responsibilities of a good shaman or white witch is to help the spirits to move on. So I am not afraid of ghosts. I always try to get them to relax. However, Michael Gira is afraid of them, which caused a little trouble in our recording sessions. When it came time to record, we did it mostly analog, with great engineers and dynamic characters going in and out all the time. Ghosts and pirates and even a succubus showed up while we were staying there. The place is called Old Soul Studios; it's an enormous old mansion, with room for all of the musicians who are working on an album to sleep there, in the upstairs bedrooms. I shared a room with my friend Tom, a percussionist who has a band called Javelin; and Michael, being the elder statesman of our group, got a room all to himself. Well, in the middle of the night, he woke up with a woman sitting on his chest and sucking the breath out of him. He said it was terrifying, but I think he liked it. Tom and I didn't have such scary experiences, but our dreams were very weird, and we both heard footsteps going up and down the hall all night long.

The next morning, I decided that we would have to treat these ghosts with as much respect as possible if we were going to get this album done without Michael, who is very sensitive and was freaking out. I tried to keep my psychic channels open and let the ghosts have a say in how the music should turn out. Michael was going out of his mind, mostly in a good way. I would record a part, and then in the playback I would hear a whole host of other voices making strange sounds. I asked the engineer if he heard it. He said no but that the ghosts in the house were very musical and that they liked to put their mark on everything he recorded there. He had experienced the usual stuff: lights going on and off, strange noises, creaky footsteps, disappearing objects that were later discovered in some bizarre place. Our tuners and picks had already begun to disappear in that house, so we ended up tuning many of our instruments to the vibrations of the house itself rather than to an electronic tuner. When we played back the songs and I heard the ghost parts in the mix, I would go into the microphone room and imitate all of the ghost sounds as well as I could, so that everybody else could hear it. And that is how we made peace with the ghosts and the record got made into the bizarre and schizophrenic collection of songs that it is. It was a collaboration between myself and the ghosts of pirates and prostitutes and musicians who had all lived in the mansion when it was a hotel over a hundred years ago.

You have been described by many as “a force of nature” or “an elemental spirit.” I know you to be an environmental activist and an extremely magical woman. Your connection with the land and with spirituality and healing work resonates through your music. How does magic and the occult practice play into your work and worldview? What's it like working within an industry that at times is dominated by a lot of cynicism and waste?

I just ignore that stuff. I turn inwards at a certain point when bullshit is going on, and visualize the experience that I want to have, and with a certain force of will, I end up associating with the good people. I only have enough energy to focus on my own personal growth and responsibility. Like attracts like. You have to embody the change that you want to see in the world. I have been using magic to guide me in my daily life ever since my logical, academic world came toppling down



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- MICHAEL GIRA

while I was studying architecture at Yale University in 2002. I had been exploring the ins and outs of rural communal life, hoping to find green alternatives to modern housing, and I had received grants for travel. I started out in Alaska, living in a tent city with a group of renegade forest defenders. There had recently been a few deaths at a tree sit because loggers had cut down a tree adjacent to one that some kids were living in, and both trees had been knocked down, smooshing these basically innocent, idealistic kids. I appeared on the scene during a very volatile moment, and there was much talk of revenge against the “establishment.” There was also a huge amount of psilocybin and MDMA to be found in this community, and as you can imagine, my life became a psychedelic swirl of mountains and trees and rainbows, and my high-functioning, logical brain was overrun by pixies and tricksters who rerouted all of my thinking mechanisms and turned me into not an architect, but a singer. It has been said that architecture is frozen music. Perhaps I was simply unfrozen.

When I saw you perform during SXSW, you talked about Paris Hilton and Britney Spears and your fascination with pop culture and these “leggy, surgically enhanced blondes” that inspired you to write “Blond and Golden Johns” and “Dominican Rum.” What is it about these women that sparked your muse?

It's just incredible how we sacrifice those starlets on the Hollywood altar. We love to build them up when they are young, beautiful virgins and then humiliate and dismember them later. Paris Hilton was smart because she degraded herself first, and after the sex tape came out, the tabloids couldn't take her down. They work for her. She is in control of a lot of things, including Britney Spears' pussy. I am impressed. But of course, I am also disgusted by the whole thing and see those girls as the lowest of the low in our culture. So I wrote this album wondering, *What do Paris and Britney need to know in order to become enlightened beings? And you know what? I think Britney is getting there. Her most recent album, Circus, is great.*

You have identified as transgendered, and it seems that in making *Parplar*, you went through some major shifts in your perceptions of gender and sexuality. In exploring these different aspects of your persona, you've played around with different roles—most noticeably in your stage attire. What transformations sparked your shift from moccasin boots to spike-heeled, red-soled Louboutins?

So, say you want to be enlightened. The first thing you have to do is get rid of your societal imprinting, the things that people tell you that you are, things you have been forced to do since childhood. I'd say the two biggest problems are gender and religion. These things take you away from yourself and blind you against your intuition, making you easy to control, making it easy to predict your actions and tastes and exploit them in the nasty world of economic and political power. If you want to be free, you have got to escape the expectations and rules of gender and religion and be yourself. The scary thing about yourself is, it's just an empty void. It is a beautiful nothingness. I have a certificate on my wall given to me by this shaman named John Perkins, who wrote *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*. It says: “Larkin Grimm: Advanced Shapeshifter.” It's right next to a statue of Kali, the goddess of necessary change and destruction. When I was a kid, playing music involved climbing trees and picking blueberries with a dulcimer on my back. I wore moccasins and played shows in canoes and gardens. Nowadays, I am living in New York City, and there is a new concept: the Indoor Shoe. I am over six feet tall in my stilettos, and men are powerless against the sexual exploitation of the Indoor Shoe. For me, this is a fun trick to play. I question everything.

There's a dark thread that runs through *Parplar* that separates it from typically optimistic freak-folk, especially in “They Were Wrong,” when you sing “*Who said to you you're going to be all right?/Well they were wrong, wrong, wrong/In my mind you're already gone.*” It's not often these days that we are told so bluntly that no, it's actually not going to be all right. Your work is almost brutally honest, but also strangely comforting. Where does that come from?

Fearlessness in the face of total disaster is really fun, really empowering. Enjoying life, even when it seems inappropriate, will make you powerful and kind.

I've heard a legend that you were kicked out of a town in Alaska for being a witch. True story or tall tale?

Oh, no. They kicked me out for being a *bitch*! I was dating several men at once in a town where men outnumbered women seven to one. I thought I was being generous, but the dudes disagreed. I was also only twenty years old at the time and partying at the bar with my fake ID, trying to pick up married women. I was young and stupid and irresponsible. I nearly started a riot. Oops! At that point in my life, I brought chaos and drama with me everywhere I went, because I wanted the world to change faster than everyone else did. Only lately have I learned that it is much safer to put this energy into the music. I try to channel my energy wisely these days and visualize a benevolent outcome. I think it has to do with growing out of that teenage rage and deciding to do something positive with my time on this earth.

Last but not least, you recently curated the Musicka Mystica Maxima Festival in New York this fall. Any reflections you'd like to share about this experience? Are you planning on doing another one next year, perhaps?

I co-curated of the festival with a gnostic priest named Frater Lux Ad Mundi, and it was presented by Ordo Templi Orienti. It was two nights of music made by practicing magicians/practicing musicians whose work celebrates the magical lifestyle, as well as a public performance of ceremonial magic ritual. Curating this festival was another weird and wonderful opportunity that fell into my lap as a result of me being open and willing to try new experiences. It was not easy to organize this whole thing and make sure that all the musicians were happy, but I would do it again. Yes, we are thinking about it. My dream lineup would be Patti Smith, Current 93, Swans (rumor is, a reunion is being considered), Lightning Bolt, Bjork, Sunn O))), Yoko Ono, St. Vitus, Devendra Banhart, Diamanda Galas, Tinariwen, Femi Kuti, Leonard Cohen, the Boredoms, and Mike Patton.





# MUSICKA MYSTICA MAXIMA



Daniel Higgs: Lungfish lead singer, Interdimensional Song-Seamstress, and Corpse-Dancer of the Mystic Crag.



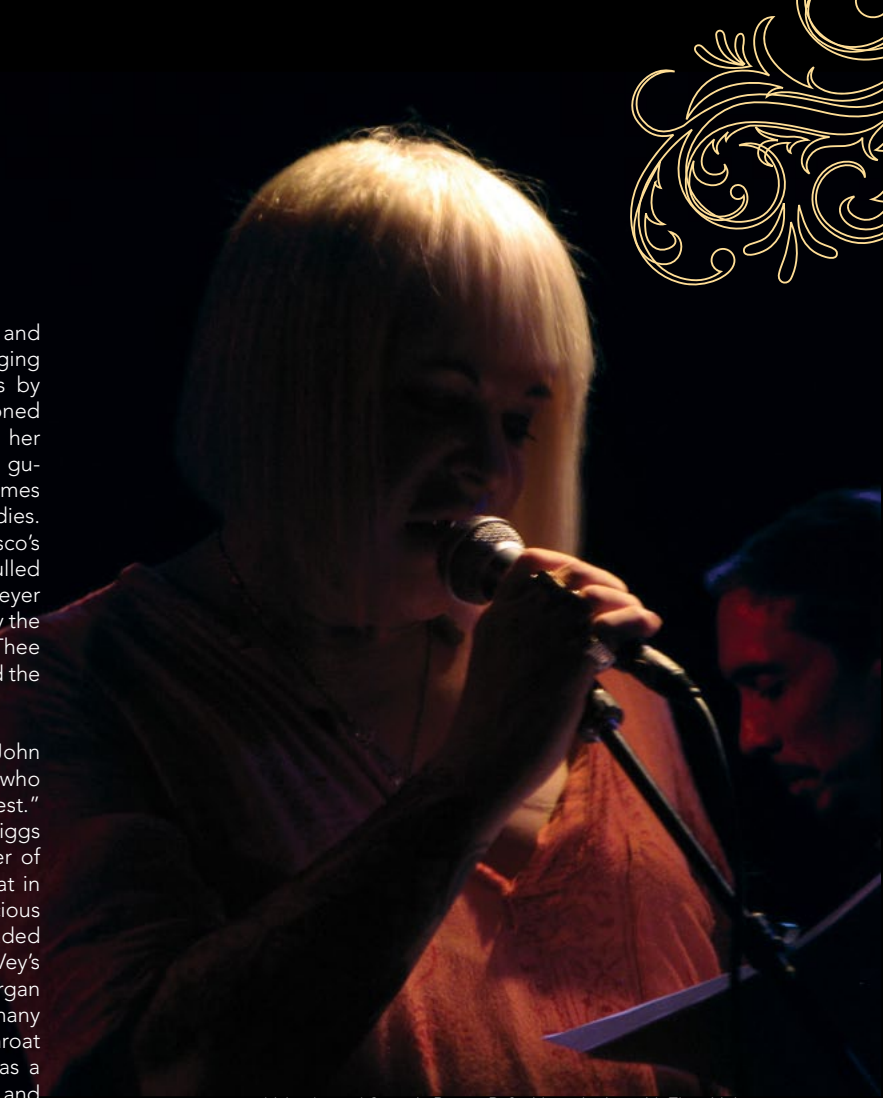
LAST SEPTEMBER, Larkin and her friend Frater Lux Ad Mundi (a gnostic priest and music industry veteran) curated the Musicka Mystica Maxima Festival. Sponsored by the Ordo Templi Orientis USA, the festival's name is a play on Mysteria Mystica Maxima, or M M M, the British section of OTO, headed by Aleister Crowley. Scheduled to take place on and honor the autumnal equinox, the festival was organized as a way to connect modern magicians and musicians within the cavernous interior of Santo's Party House, a nightclub in Chinatown run by Andrew WK.

Genesis P-Orridge (who performed with Thee Majesty), remarked that it had been suggested that this festival was the first OTO-sponsored musical event. "Yeah, well, what about the bloody Rites of Eleusis?" s/he retorted. The Rites of Eleusis were a series of public performances in 1910 that combined music and theater with esoteric ritual drawn from classical antiquity. A review of the rites, from a penny paper of the day described the scene thusly: *"There ... appeared the Angel of Death, the Hero, the Messenger, likewise willowy youths who looked intensely mystic, and flappers in queer garments, with their souls in their eyes ... Yes, the show is very well staged. Dark house, mystic chanting, eerie lights, Eleusinian patter ... There has always been about [Crowley's] writings and preachings an atmosphere of strange perfume, as if he were swaying a censer before the altar of some heathen goddess."* Not so very much has changed in all this time, it would seem, as all of the aforementioned elements were present during these two nights of magic and music. Frater Lux Ad Mundi explained the correspondence between the two: "Aleister Crowley defined magic as 'the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will.' Within this culture, artistic creation is considered magical action, pure and simple. Making something out of nothing, or something new out of pre-existing elements, is causing deliberate change, as well as inducing subsequent changes in the minds of those exposed to it. Art that enlightens and expands the consciousness of the public is among the highest magical work performed. Many avant-garde artists, from Salvador Dali and Leonora Carrington, to Harry Smith and Maya Deren, to Alan Moore and Grant Morrison, to name a few, have described their work as functioning as ritual or alchemical process for them and their audiences. Likewise, many magicians employ choreography, costuming, visual arts, and poetry in their ritual work."

These elements were utilized in both the Rites of Eleusis and the Musicka Mystica Maxima Festival to stunning effect, judging from the rapt audiences drinking in powerful performances by Arrington de Dionysio of Old Time Relijun and the tent-cocooned experimental noise combo Nautical Almanac. Larkin and her band (with violinist Paran Amirnazari and John Houx on gu-zheng) electrified the room with renditions from *Parplar*, at times accompanied by a choir of ten or so soulful-eyed, dark-clad ladies. Dark chamber music swoonings were induced by San Francisco's Amber Asylum. Kris Force and her band's ghostly crooning lulled crowds into a trance that only intensified later, when Genesis Breyer P-Orridge took the stage. A reverent reading of work written by the late, much-beloved Lady Jaye and spoken word pieces from Thee Majesty were accompanied by Morrison Edley on tympanis and the machete-wielding guitarist Bryin Dall.

The second night brought an early improvisational set with John Zorn and Bill Laswell, followed by Spires That in the Sunset Rise, who Grimm has described as "straight-up witches from the Midwest." Gray-bearded punk godfather and banjo-wizard Daniel Higgs (aka the Interdimensional song-seamstress and corpse-dancer of the Mystic Crag), formerly of the hardcore-band Lungfish, sat in a stark white spotlight and called forth spirits of the subconscious in a quavering voice ancient as stone. Other highlights included J. G. Thirlwell (aka Foetus) telling tales of visiting Anton LaVey's mansion while on ecstasy and being serenaded on the pipe organ by the high priest himself. This gathering of powers inspired many revelations and meetings of minds against a backdrop of throat singing and medico-psychedelic light shows. The last act was a ceremonial operatic performance by LaBanna Bly of P.A.R.A. and her acid-green-bewigged Scarlet Woman, for what magical event could be considered complete without the requisite heathen goddesses swinging censers?

**ARTICLE** Angeliska Polacheck  
**LARKIN GRIMM PHOTOS** Ports Bishop, Jim Gavenus, and Knomia  
**MMM PHOTOS** Todd Brooks of Pendu Org Arts & Actions



Living legend Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, singing with Thee Majesty.



Nautical Almanac, performing live at Santo's, NYC 09/21/09 as part of the Musicka Mystica Maxima Festival, presented by the Ordo Templi Orientis (American branch).





“As I’m blending a perfume, I know when it’s finished because all of a sudden, it achieves this particular shape. Frequently, it will have color, line, texture, and occasionally sound.”  
**Christopher Brosius, page 88**

ILLUSTRATION Zoetica Ebb

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# BRAVE OLD WORLD

PHOTOGRAPHER Chad Michael Ward  
WARDROBE Mother of London  
MODEL, HAIR & MAKEUP Bad Charlotte









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that it’s vestigial in humans, like the appendix—that is not the case! Lots and lots of studies that have been done conclusively prove that the human vomeronasal organ system’s ability to read pheromones is alive and well. It’s certainly not nearly as acute as in dogs or horses, but it’s there—when you have a truly inexplicable reaction to someone who you have never met before, whether you like them or dislike them. How many times have you met someone who makes you feel slightly uncomfortable, and you don’t know why? It’s not their body language, it’s not the way they dress, it’s not what they’re saying—but there’s something *off*. Chances are extremely good that it is the way they smell.

**I’m very curious about how your synaesthesia contributed to the evolution of your work.**

I didn’t realize that I was synaesthetic until perhaps 2005 or 2006, when I was recommended a book called *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*, by Dr. Richard Cytowic. He was one of the first people to really explore synaesthesia as a neurological condition and not some mental aberration. I’ve always had a very strong reaction to words, not only how they sound, but how they look as well. Also, often when I encounter new materials or new accords, they have a shape, and I’ve begun to realize that it’s always worked this way. As I’m blending a perfume, I know when it’s finished because all of a sudden, it achieves this particular shape. Frequently, it will have color, line, texture, and occasionally sound, and sometimes they’re incredibly complex—but it’s then that I know *it’s done*.

**That’s amazing, and very lucky, because it’s so easy to overdo a blend. It’s like painting—you can keep muddling it until it’s just a mess.**

A lot of people have asked me, “How did you learn to do this?” The fact is that I have no training. I really am like a freak of nature. Biologically and genetically, I’m designed to do this thing, and it’s a thing that very few other people can do and which nobody can really do in the same way. Countless young people have come up to me and said, “Oh my God, I would love to be a perfumer because I have such an acute nose. I am sure I’d be really good at it. I can smell *anything*! Like if there’s just a little hint of blah, blah, blah, I can notice that.” Well, you know what? An acute nose for recognizing or detecting odor does not make for a great perfumer any more than somebody with acute vision is going to turn into the next Matisse or Picasso. There is a little more to it than that.

**Where did your path to this profession originate?**

It all happened entirely by accident. I studied visual design in college. I was working my way through school and had a job working for a cosmetic company. That led me to a job at Kiehl’s, which was fascinating. This was during the period when they still had a range of fragrance oils. There were about 125 of them. I began to remember them all, and from there, I would think, *Well, I would really like a perfume that smells like this and this and this*. So I would pour little tiny bits together, and lo and behold, I was good at it! I can remember smells from a very long time ago and have an uncanny memory for them. When I am working on something new, if I want to recreate the smell of a certain cardboard box, I can remember every cardboard box I’ve ever smelled in my life. I am told that the ability to conjure a scent mentally is extraordinarily rare—but I can do it. I can remember them and rearrange them in my head, and that’s the foundation of how the perfumes are made. I learned some of the technical fundamentals at Kiehl’s, as well. They had some special clients who they had created perfume blends for, or who wanted certain fragrances in a cologne formula, which meant that the compound had to be blended into an alcohol base. A perfume base is part alcohol and part water, and oil and water do not mix. For example, wood fragrances, generally, when they react with water, become cloudy. Usually, that’s considered undesirable, so all of that stuff gets filtered out, and you might need to filter it again and again depending on what the material is. However, you’ll notice that a few perfumes I do are slightly opalescent or white; it’s usually the wood in them. I don’t like filtering things. Though there may be only a few people who would be able to detect that there’s a

difference in the smell; I *really* can. I want to use the entire wood, not just this little part of it.

**Because the aesthetic is in the smell, not in the way it looks.**

Exactly, and that’s really the foundation for my work. It’s why the packaging is so phenomenally minimal. If I could find a way to get it down to nothing at all, or just maybe a number, I would do it, but it gets too confusing. A perfume is not about the art of making pretty bottles or pretty packages or beautiful ad campaigns—the art is in the smell. Perfume is all about **something completely and utterly abstract**.

**Too true. So, tell a bit about your individual accords. You have quite a collection of some very unusual scents!**

On this wall behind me are many of the individual accords. I group them into fourteen very general categories to describe the major aspect of the smell. Sometimes I will add or subtract from the group. One of the annoying things about making perfume is that it’s entirely dependent upon chemicals, whether they are natural or synthetic, and sometimes natural materials become too expensive to be extracted, so they **stop**, and you lose an enormous amount of stuff. Sometimes the companies that make synthetic chemicals will discontinue something, generally because they have come up with something that they want to sell more of. So they will discontinue the old and try to replace it with the new. But if the smell isn’t the same, it means that I can’t get all of the materials that I need to make certain perfumes. So the process has to perpetually change and evolve. Some changes have to do with what I’m interested in. For the past few years, it’s been less about the more sensationalist scents or the unnatural, chemical series. The food group series is very small to begin with. Making the smell of roast beef is all well and good, but how is that going to be *used*? Since I opened here, I’ve been focused on creating very specific, wearable, experiential perfumes, and roast beef is one that I have, for the present, lost interest in. I was kind of lucky because even with my former company [Demeter], which turned into this enormous collection of individual scents, ultimately all I was doing there was turning out more and more individual accords. And it’s great to say, “Now we have a boiled lobster smell,” but so what?

**Why would you want to smell like boiled lobster in the first place? I guess unless you’re Gerard de Nerval!**

It’s sort of like offering people absolutely nothing to read but a dictionary. At the end of the day, you want something more.

**I remember when the Demeter line came out and it was a huge thing for me to finally be able to have a smell like honey or black pepper or crushed tomato leaf in a bottle.**

That’s what I wanted. Back when I decided to do Tomato, that’s what it was supposed to smell like. I really wanted it to smell like tomato leaves. I love that smell; I always have. It’s still a scent that I’m always improving on—from the original tomato leaf back in 1999, to when I moved over here. That was good then, but I can do so much better now. There were a lot of scents that when I opened here, I thought, *Let’s just put those away and do a better version*. Snow was good in 1999, but it’s better now. It’ll probably be even better ten years from now.

“*Perfume*  
*is too often an ethereal corset,*  
*trapping everyone in the same unnatural shape.”*  
- CB Manifesto

**I saw that you may possibly be developing a section based on metal?**

Metal perfumes are difficult. There are ways to trick the nose into thinking that it might be smelling something metallic or diesel-y in a perfume, but to isolate that and make just one specific scent can be an entirely different matter. Frequently, it’s a function of the molecules not existing in the perfumer’s palette. So there are a lot of things—metal smells, certain papers, or chemical smells like bleach, turpentine, and gasoline—that can be great smells but very problematic. I get a lot of requests for things like glue, in particular. There are a lot of artists and designers who come here, and they love the smell of certain types of glue or magic markers. Enormous components of those orders are highly toxic—things that cannot be used in a perfume; but without those molecules, you no longer get the reality.

**Many of the larger companies in the perfume industry rely mainly on completely synthetic, manufactured scents that have no direct connection with the natural counterparts they are meant to represent. I’ve read that some, synthetic musks in particular, can be extremely toxic.**

Well, to be perfectly honest, synthetic musks are how I arrived in this business in the first place. There is a fairly substantial group of chemicals that are all used to create them. Generally, they are mixed together, but there’s one particular chemical that’s frequently used, also as a base note in a ton of perfumes and personal care products: Galaxolide. It’s in just about everything, and it happens to be a chemical that I, and a lot of other people, are extremely sensitive to. I’m trying to remember when it was ... maybe 1996 or ’97? Right after a lot of ozonic fragrances were a huge trend, even with designers who should have known better. Issey Miyake came out with L’Eau d’Issey, which makes me nauseous. I love the man, love what he has done, love the bottle of the perfume, but the perfume itself makes me heave. There were a ton of them that came out at the time. Everything was supposed to smell like the ocean or like fresh air. I said something to a colleague at the time: “All these new ozonic perfumes, and this whole ozone business in general, make me sick.” And he said, “Well, Christopher, fifty thousand years ago, you would have been the one in the tribe who would have asked, is this water safe to drink? Is this place safe to camp? Is this food safe to eat? Because ozone in its pure form is highly poisonous. That’s why it’s bothering you.” Interesting. Obviously, what’s used in perfumery is not, but the point is, it’s still firing my system in a way that reads as unacceptable. A lot of synthetics are like that.

Now, having said that, I *use* lots of synthetics. There are certain manufactured things that simply don’t occur in nature. When it comes to a lot of synthetics, I am more drawn to materials that are referred to as *nature identical*. It means that even though they are arrived at by a synthetic process, their molecular nature is exactly the same as that found in the molecule from the flower, the grass, the leaf, the wood. The ones that I have more hesitation to use and am always a good deal more cautious with are those that have never existed in nature. I can’t help but think that’s not a good idea. I’ve run into battles over it with oil houses I have worked with, big manufacturers of their own







chemicals, again and again. Their sales people perpetually say, “Oh, we have this fabulous new thing that smells exactly like watermelon,” and I just think, *What are you talking about? This smells like Jolly Rancher candies, at best!* I understand that they have a vested interest in selling something new for their company. That’s how they exist, and that’s how they collect their salary, but to actually sit there and really *believe* what they’re saying?

**Have you ever tasted a watermelon?**

Yeah! Have you ever really *smelled* a watermelon? These things are light years apart! There are a lot of things in this day and age that are scented that should not be. I don’t need my trash bags to have a scent. I don’t want scented tissues. I don’t want laundry detergent that is so powerfully scented that you pull the clothes out and they smell as if they’ve been perfumed. I want to *choose* these things. The basic products used in one’s daily life have no business being so intrusive, but *they are*. A lot of them contain chemicals that many people find really repulsive. I find it very irritating that there’s such a carrying-on about second-hand smoke in this country, but people can still walk out of their house doused with a perfume that’s going to make someone ill. If they run into one hundred people, chances are good that twenty-five of those people who encounter the perfume they are wearing are going to feel nauseous, have a headache, or feel really sick.

**Many people, myself included, are highly allergic to some of these compounds.**

Exactly. That’s not to say that I think perfume should be regulated. In fact, around 1999 or so, the city of Halifax in Nova Scotia put a ban on wearing scents in public. Totally ridiculous. I mean, I understand the foundation, but it’s like how, for instance, people should know if they are making too much noise. People need to know when they are being obnoxious. And I think people need to know when they are being offensive with a fragrance. It’s a personal responsibility, and frankly, to go further back, I think the fragrance manufacturers have a greater responsibility in terms of what they’re pushing out there.

**It seems like things are changing rather quickly now, in our understanding and appreciation for scent. We are simultaneously having massive shifts for the better and sometimes for the worse.**

Sometimes you have to have the worst before you get to what’s better—that’s history.

**So can I ask you, are there any perfumes that you don’t hate?**

Actually, there are certain companies who make fragrances that I really do admire. A lot of the perfumes I loved are extinct now, or if they still exist, it’s as versions that bear no resemblance to what they used to be. I like all of the Serge Lutens perfumes. I know the perfumer who has done the majority of them; he also created the perfume that Serge Lutens did for Shiseido, Féminité du Bois, which is this beautiful cedar wood scent. I smelled that in 1987 and said, “Oh, my God, that’s

*fantastic!* I like a lot of Annick Goutal perfumes; the majority of them are wonderful. I’ve always been sorry that I never got to meet Goutal, because in so many ways we were so similar—she was also not trained—but she died before I had the opportunity. The perfumes that are done by Jean Laporte for L’Artisan Parfumeur are also fascinating, and I find it interesting that a number of his have also been inspired by exploring his childhood memories. I found that we have such a similar thread, though what he does is so very different from what I do. I do like the perfumes that Jean-Claude Ellena made for Hermès. I wish they would bring Amazon back in this country, because I love fierce green perfumes. They are really fantastic.

**It’s been said that it is very difficult to accurately describe a smell in itself, without borrowing descriptive words from the other senses: soft, sour, fruity, bitter, acrid. Isn’t it odd that writing about perfume can still be so transcendent? There are some people who are really able to capture the nature of these essences in words and get into the heart of what we actually experience when we smell.**

It really is a particular talent, and it’s one of the reasons I think the novel *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* is so brilliant. I would love to meet Patrick Süskind to understand how one can really experience the world in that way. How he’s able to describe things is highly evocative. Luca Turin is another one. When he is writing about perfumes, even though he’s describing something entirely metaphorically, he still creates the impression of what a perfume is *really like*. Colette was able to do it. There are a lot of writers who are able to do it, but it’s a very particular skill.

**What are you focusing on right now? What new roads are your muses taking you down?**

Well, there are perfumes that I continue work on and always will, but it’s time to do something different. I’ve been sort of locked into routine. Eventually, you hit a point where you get kind of bored. I find that in the process of looking into doing other things, each kind of design really does somehow feed another. I’ve actually been working on doing clothes for quite a while and was preparing to launch a small collection this summer. Then we had the economic disaster, so that’s going to wait. It’s rescheduled for next spring. I want to do more writing, and there are other kinds of design that I find fascinating, as well. I also really try to keep up with the journal entries on my website. First of all, I think that these are things are nice to share with people, or in some cases, these are things that some people really need to think about. But it’s also nice practice for getting back into the habit of actually enjoying the writing a little bit more. So we’ll see.

**PHOTOGRAPHS** AC Berkeiser, Christin Rucker, Angeliska Polacheck  
**INTERVIEW** Angeliska Polacheck



COILHOUSE

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# Black Phoenix Alchemy Lab and Black Phoenix Trading Post

## THE DISTRICT



*Honi Soit Qui  
Mal Y Pense  
Shame to Him  
Who Evil Thinks*

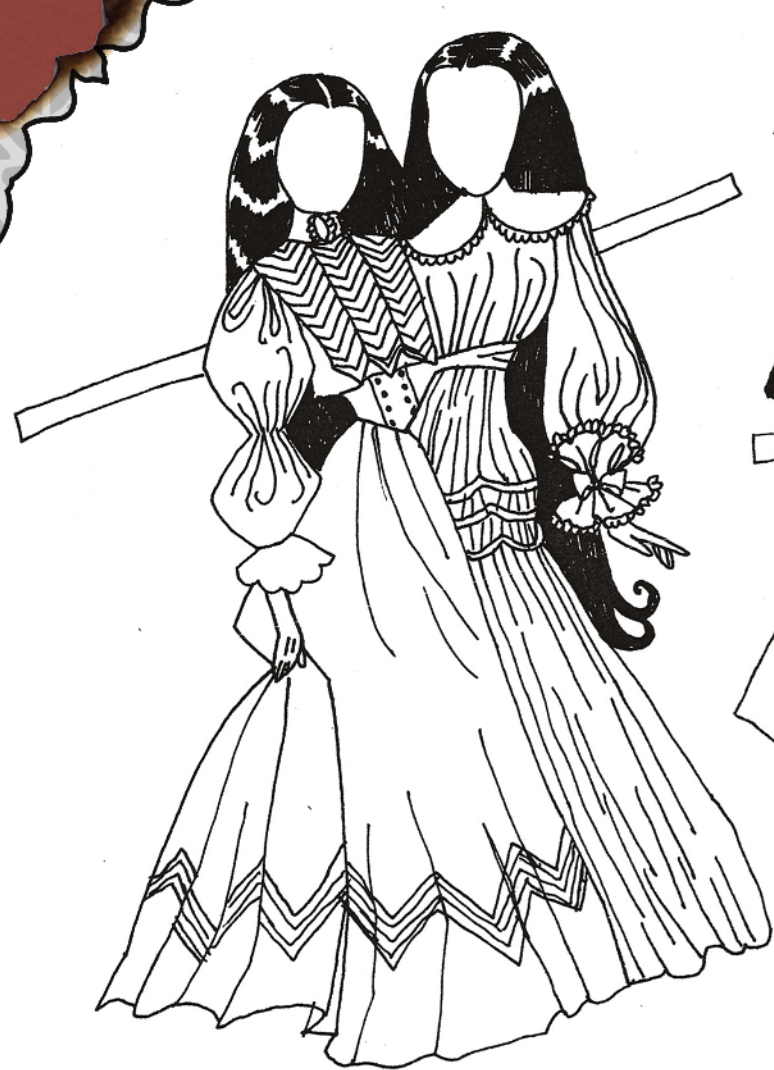
BLACK PHOENIX ALCHEMY LAB and BLACK PHOENIX TRADING POST are proud to present a scent series representing the people, places, and culture of NEW ORLEANS' STORYVILLE, featuring artwork by the inimitable MOLLY CRABAPPLE and art design by INK ASYLUM.

Lavish bordellos and shady cribs, dazzling jazz, and swinging saloons: bounded by BASIN, IBERVILLE, ROBERTSON, and ST LOUIS, STORYVILLE, known to locals as THE DISTRICT, was NEW ORLEANS' legal red light district from 1897 to 1917. This scent collection features perfume oil blends, atmosphere sprays, and a t-shirt all inspired by THE DISTRICT.

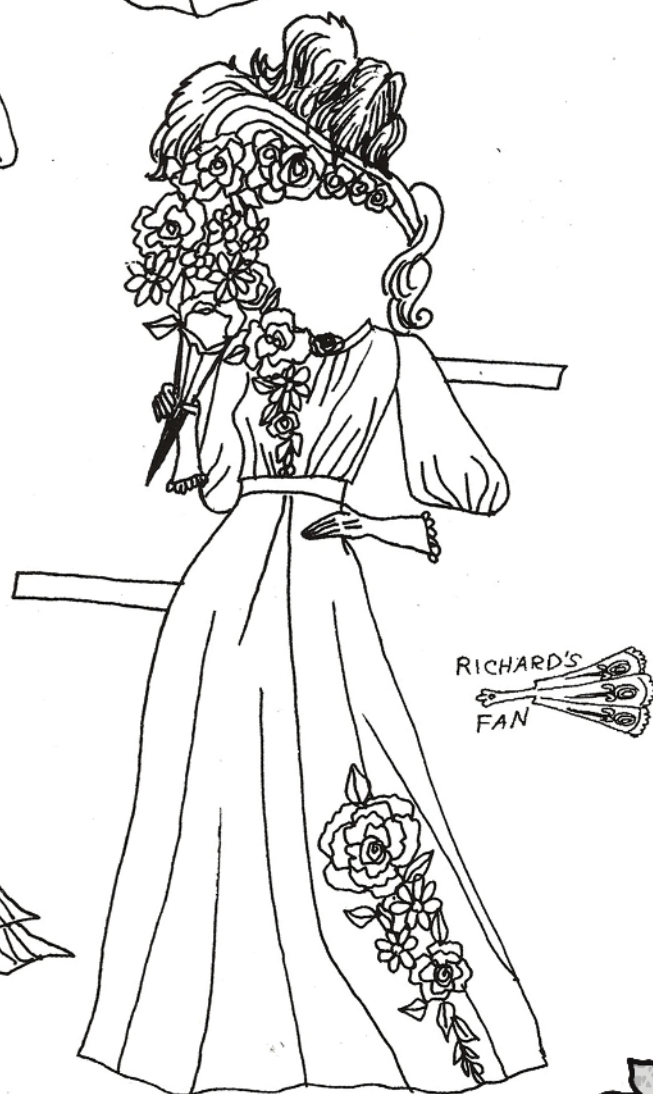
This is a charitable, not-for-profit venture, proceeds from every bottle go to HABITAT FOR HUMANITY: NEW ORLEANS.

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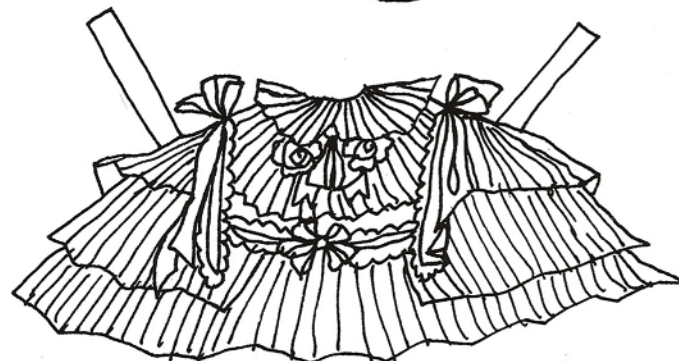




Hindrance +  
Perfidias  
evening wear,  
coat, and cat...  
"Bitey" & "Hissy"

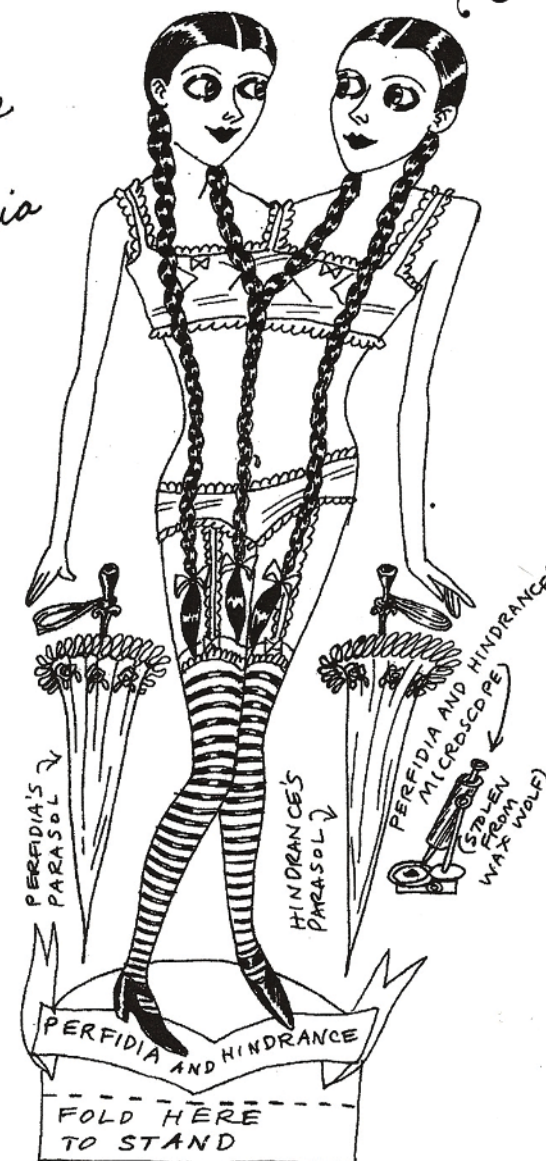


RICHARD'S  
FAN



# The Mavens of MEATCAKE

Hindrance  
&  
Perfidia



HINDRANCE'S  
HAT



HINDRANCE AND  
PERFIDIA'S  
KNITTING

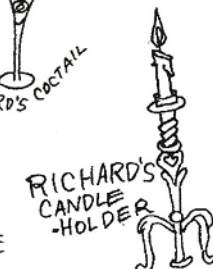


PERFIDIA'S  
HAT

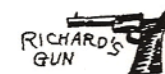
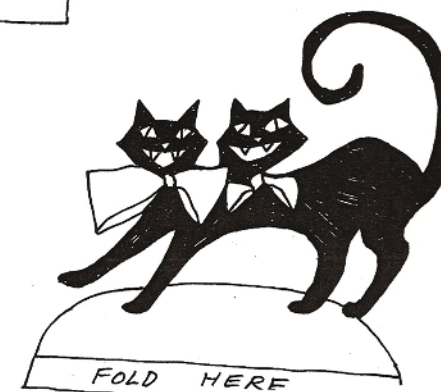
Richard Dirt



RICHARD'S  
COCKTAIL



RICHARD'S  
CANDLE  
HOLDER



DON'T  
NOTICE  
RICHARD'S  
GUN

ILLUSTRATIONS Dame Darcy



# BLACK PHOENIX ALCHEMY LAB

*purveyors of fine esoteric  
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HAND-ILLUSTRATED BY MADAME TALBOT  
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